

ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY

M A G A Z I N E

OCTOBER 1997

THE TONGAN NUDE

P.I. Jacob Asch
in the South Pacific
BY ARTHUR LYONS

Also...
Gary Alexander
David Braly
D. A. McGuire

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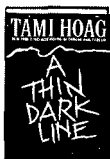
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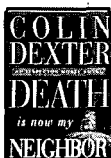
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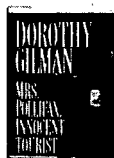
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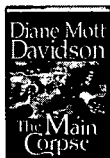
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Four new writers bring their talents to this issue. Barbara McCarty, "The Best Qualifications"; I. J. Parker, "Instruments of Murder"; and Lynn K. Miller, "The Piano Man," are all teachers. Daryl Gregory, "An Equitable Distribution," is a technical writer for a software company.

"My special interests," Ms. McCarty tells us, "include gardening and horses—there is a connection between the two, obvious to gardeners if not horsewomen. . . . My father was a construction superintendent for an international firm, so in my early days home was wherever the job was—from Texas to Toronto. Today, home seems to be Redding, Connecticut; St. Simons Island, Georgia; and Gardena, California; and sometimes I feel as if my hat is

hanging in one place, my jacket in another, and my shoes in the third." Our story is her first published piece of fiction.

As is I. J. Parker's tale: "Ran out of stuff I liked to read. Writing turned out to be more fun than reading. . . . A mystery fan since my teens, I came to the writing naturally via teaching writing and my studies in Far Eastern literatures. (Hence the setting in ancient Japan.)"

"I had too many stories to tell," says Ms. Miller, a history teacher from Pittsburgh now living in Utah. "They wouldn't stay in my head." This is her first mystery.

Mr. Gregory, author of three prior stories, was inspired by the Clarion Writer's Workshop. For the rest, "Nothing of interest has happened so far, but I'm coming to terms with that."

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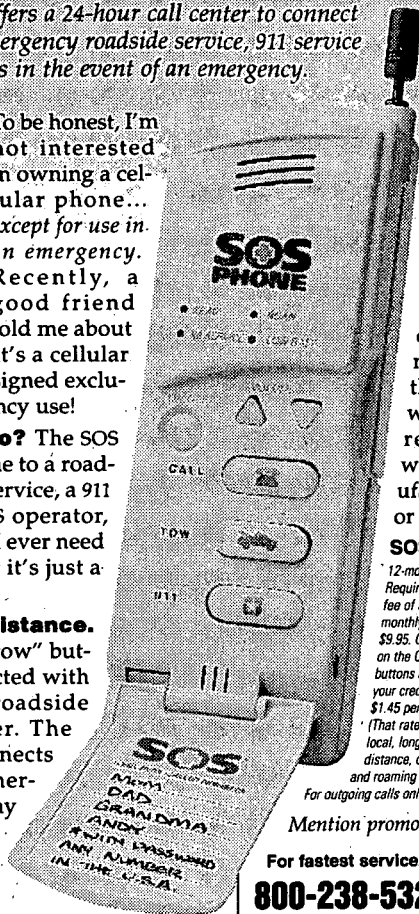
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FICTION

The Tongan Nude

Arthur Lyons

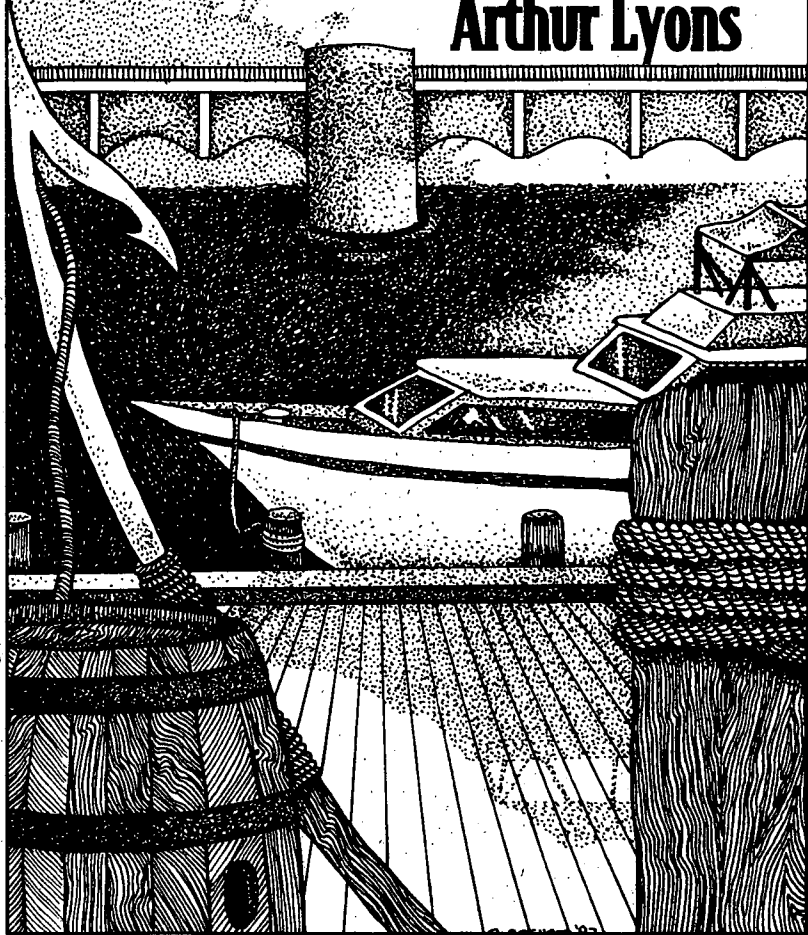


Illustration by Ray Basham

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 10/97

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The immigration officer looked up from my passport and eyed me suspiciously. "It says here you are a private investigator, Mr. Asch."

"That's right."

"Are you here in Tonga on business?"

"Strictly pleasure," I lied. He looked as if he didn't believe me but stamped my passport anyway.

I got my bag through customs without incident and walked out of the airport terminal into a crowd of tourist-hustling taxi drivers wearing flower print shirts. One of them, a burly man with nappy black hair, reached out for my suitcase. "Where you stay, brudda? I take you."

"International Dateline Hotel."

"You got it, brudda."

He threw my bag into the trunk of a beat-up Nissan, and I got in. Five minutes later we were whizzing past lush green fields of taro and stands of coconut palms.

The cabbie's name was Daniel, and he kept up a constant tour-guide patter, pointing out all the local sights of interest as we passed including the princess's house, the driveway of which was flanked by two huge stone lions.

I didn't mention that the princess's father, the king of Tonga, was one of the reasons I was

here. It seemed that a few years ago the kingdom had been rocked by a scandal when it was revealed that the king and his cronies had been stashing away millions in U.S. banks, profits from selling passports at twenty thousand dollars a pop, declaring the purchasers to be "Tongan citizens." But as the passports didn't allow the buyer to actually live in Tonga, most countries didn't recognize them as legitimate. To remedy the situation, the Tongan parliament amended the state constitution, allowing the purchasers to live in Tonga—and upped the price to fifty thousand.

There was a good possibility that one of the buyers, Stanley Weiner, had purchased his citizenship two years ago with part of the half million dollars he had embezzled from the First Trust Bank of California, where he'd been a vice-president. Nobody would have suspected that fact if one of the secretaries at the bank had not been on a South Pacific vacation and been browsing in a local art gallery where she spotted a man who was a ringer for Weiner talking with the gallery's owner. The secretary had hung around and, after Weiner had left, made some discreet inquiries of the owner. She was told that the ringer's name was Jon Villard and that he was a British expatriate and local

artist who painted scenes of Tongan life quite popular with tourists.

The secretary immediately called the president of the bank, who then called me and told me to get on the next plane to Tonga and find out if Villard was Weiner. If he was, I was to retrieve the bank's money, or what was left of it, and notify the FBI to start extradition proceedings against the wayward financier. Although the loss had been covered by insurance, it seemed the president took Weiner's betrayal personally.

Just to make sure the bank wouldn't be throwing good money after bad, I'd checked around before leaving and found that Weiner had been an amateur artist who'd always dreamed of trading his ledgers for an easel and going off to some romantic bohemian spot to paint.

Nuku'alofa, the island's capital, was on the bohemian side but was a little short on the romance, unless you considered a busy little clapboard throwback to Michener times long gone in the South Pacific romantic, which, being from L.A., I did. The International Dateline, touted as the town's only "luxury" hotel, a three story building that fronted on the ocean, was more modern than the rest of the town but still had a tired, weathered look to it. Daniel car-

ried my bags inside and as I paid him asked, "You want a tour of the island? I give you good price."

I thought about it. "You know this place pretty well, I take it?"

"Nobody knows it better, brudda."

"You're hired."

He broke into a wide grin. "You ready, you just come out front. I'll be waiting."

If the Dateline was the best Tonga had to offer, it was no wonder monarchies were no longer in vogue. My third floor room was about the size of a broom closet, the lamp on the nightstand had no shade, and the air conditioner didn't work. The only thing it did have was a spectacular view of the waterfront and the blue Pacific stretching out to infinity. I threw open all the windows to let in the sea breeze, unpacked my suitcase, and went downstairs.

Daniel was sitting behind the wheel, his eyes closed. They snapped open when I opened the back door. "You know where the Pirics Gallery is?"

"Sure enough, brudda."

"By the way, the name isn't brudda. It's Jake."

"Okay, Jake."

We took off into town, and after about two blocks I was glad I'd hired a driver. None of the streets had names on them, al-

though there were signs pointing the way to various hotels and tourist attractions. Throngs of people crowded the streets—laughing schoolgirls in smart white and black uniforms; men and women in wraparound skirts, some of which were covered with finely woven straw mats to show respect for the king. At least that's what I'd read in the tour book on the long and tortuous plane ride down.

After five more blocks Daniel pulled the car over to the curb and parked. The Pirics Gallery occupied a corner of a two story wooden building, below a Chinese restaurant. Colorful paintings of tropical landscapes and sarong-wrapped women filled its front window. I told Daniel to wait for me and went in.

Aside from the oil canvases and watercolors that adorned the walls, the place was empty. Most of the paintings were the typical tourist tripe of ocean-scapes, tropical landscapes, or studies of birds and flowers. One oil canvas, however, got my attention. It was of four native women in sarongs washing clothes in a river. The piece was primitively done, with broad brushstrokes and bright splashes of primary colors. What really got my attention, however, was the signature in the corner: Jon Villard.

"Like it?"

I turned to the voice. It belonged to a very short man dressed in a white linen shirt, blue slacks, and sandals. His hair was blond—almost white—as were his eyebrows and eyelashes, and his face was smooth and round.

"Yes, in fact. How much is it?"

"Four hundred dollars." His accent was foreign, but I couldn't place it.

"Who's the artist?"

"Jon Villard. He's local." He paused. "I am the owner of the gallery. Gerard Pirics."

We shook hands. "Jacob Asch."

The pale blue eyes looked me over shrewdly. "You're American, Mr. Asch?"

"Yes."

"You in Tonga on business or holiday?"

That seemed to be everyone's favorite question. "Holiday."

He sized me up, then went in for the kill. "Would you like to buy the painting?"

"Maybe. Do you have any other of the artist's works?"

He frowned. "Unfortunately, not at the moment. Right now he's working on a series of still lifes."

"I'd like to see them."

He smiled a small smile, shook his head. "I'm afraid he won't even let me see his work

in progress."

"How can I get in touch with him?"

He put his small hands together. "He has no phone, and he detests visitors. He's a bit of an eccentric. Very reclusive."

If he was my man, with good reason, I thought. "Then you wouldn't part with his address? If I bought something, I'd make sure you got the commission."

"Jon has an exclusive to sell through my gallery. If he found out I'd given out his address, he would consider it a breach of faith." He hesitated. "Perhaps I could set up a meeting. Where are you staying?"

He took down the information, and I got back into the cab. "Daniel, you know a lot of people on this island. Know where I might find an artist named Jon Villard?"

It turned out he did. On the way he explained to me that everybody was related to everybody in Tonga and it just so happened that Villard was living with Davina, one of Daniel's many female cousins. It was apparently big news on the island when a native took up house-keeping with a foreigner.

The house was halfway across the island, a small white wooden house sitting on the edge of a lagoon. Obviously Villard limited his painting to canvas—the house was badly in need of a coat. Daniel parked behind a

rusty blue Datsun pickup, and I got out of the car.

A cacophony of angry voices spilled through the wide-open front door as I went up the walkway. A bushy-haired Tongan with a massive chest and arms appeared suddenly in the doorway, his huge hand clamped on the wrist of a beautiful young brown-skinned girl with long black hair and a flower behind her ear. She wore a colorful sarong that she clutched to her bosom as if it had been thrown on in a hurry and was in danger of coming apart. The girl was yelling something in Tongan at her captor and wrestling against his grip, but her efforts were ineffectual as she was tugged relentlessly toward the pickup.

The huge man stopped two feet from me and turned back to the house, where a tall, thin, pale man with a dark beard and ponytail had appeared in the doorway.

"Stay away from my sister," the big Tongan shouted, pointing a finger at the bearded man. "Or I come back and hurt you bad."

The Tongan paid no attention to me as he pulled the struggling girl to the truck and tossed her into the front seat like a rag doll. As he opened the driver's door, he spotted Daniel in the taxi and waved, then got into the truck and peeled off.

I went to the front door where the bearded man was still standing.

"What do you want?" he asked curtly in a British accent.

I took a good look at his face. It was long and finely chiseled, almost but not quite handsome, with deep-set blue eyes and a long aquiline nose. Neither the accent, which wasn't bad actually, nor the beard could hide the fact that he was my man. I jacked a thumb back at the road. "What was that all about?"

"That's none of your business," he snapped. "Who are you?"

"Name's Asch, Weiner. I'm working for First Trust Bank. They want their money and you back, although they'd probably settle for the money."

Hearing his real name made his mouth drop open a little and froze him in place long enough for me to shoulder my way past him into the house.

The house was one large, rather shabby room with window views out back onto the lagoon. There was a swaybacked bed in one corner, a small kitchenette, and a smattering of furniture, but most of the place was dedicated to his artistic pursuits. There was a large drawing table covered with palettes and bottles of paint, and next to it were two easels. On one was a finished painting of the girl I'd just seen being dragged out. I

could see now why it looked as if she'd dressed hurriedly. In the picture she was posed casually on a chair, and the only thing she had on was the flower behind her ear. Whatever was on the other easel was covered with a paint-stained cloth. I took a step toward it, but he stepped quickly in front of me. "Look, you, whoever you are, I don't know what you're talking about, so I'd appreciate it if you'd get out of my house."

"I'm talking about five hundred thousand you embezzled from First Trust, Weiner. From the looks of this place you didn't put it into real estate. Where is it?"

"You must have me mixed up with someone else. My name is Villard. Jon Villard."

I whipped out a photograph of Weiner and held it up to his face. "Remarkable resemblance, don't you think?"

He picked up a hammer from the drawing table and held it up menacingly. "Get out of here. Now."

I grinned. "Tsk, ts, your accent is slipping." I went to the front door. "I'll be back, Weiner. With the cops."

Back in the cab I said to Daniel, "You know that pissed-off big guy?"

He nodded. "He's my cousin, too. Mika."

His stock of cousins apparent-

ly wasn't limited to the female variety. He went on: "Mika is Davina's brother. He's mad because Davina is disgracing her family by living in sin. He came to take her back."

"I thought Polynesians are supposed to be understanding about little things like that."

"Maybe in Tahiti. Not Tonga. We are a very religious people. We even swim with our clothes on."

"My mistake. I should have brought a tux instead of my bathing suit."

Daniel drove me back to the hotel, and on his recommendation I ate dinner at a small, chic restaurant called the Seaview. Since it was near the hotel, I decided to walk it and instructed Daniel to pick me up in the morning.

The dinner was excellent but pricey, but I figured the bank could afford it. The road that followed the shoreline to the hotel was unlighted and the night was very dark on the walk, so I didn't see the two men step out of the bushes until they were on top of me. The first blow caught me in the gut, doubling me over and causing me to lose all that expensive lobster I'd eaten at the Seaview. The next one came up from the ground and straightened me up. I didn't keep track of the rest.

I was on the ground being

kicked and a voice said, "Get out of Tonga." Then I heard a car screech up and a door slam. "Hey!" a voice yelled.

The kicking stopped, and there was the sound of feet running away. Hands reached under my armpits and hoisted me upright. I looked up at Daniel's grinning face. He had eighty-seven teeth. "Where the hell did you come from?"

"I had nothing to do, so I hung around. I thought you might want a ride back to the hotel."

"Those guys your cousins, too?"

"I couldn't see who they were. You want to go to the hospital?"

His teeth merged back into the normal thirty-two. I didn't think I had a concussion. "Just back to the hotel."

He dropped me off, and I went up to my room and took a handful of aspirin and a hot shower. My jaw and eye were discolored and starting to swell. I lay down on the bed and let the ocean breeze wafting in through the open windows cool my body. The South Pacific was a romantic spot, all right. Too bad I had nobody to share a good beating with.

Daniel picked me up the next morning and drove me to the police station; a weathered stucco building facing the ocean,

where I was sent into a small office two-thirds of which was occupied by a three hundred-plus pound inspector whose enormous girth was barely contained by his blue uniform. His name was Captain Topou, and his face was pockmarked and unfriendly. It became even more unfriendly when I ran down for him who I was and what I was doing there.

"I called immigration, Mr. Asch," he said, scowling. "You stated on your immigration form that you were in Tonga on holiday, not business. Lying to immigration is a serious offense."

"I wasn't really lying," I fudged. "If Villard had turned out not to be Weiner, I *would* have been here on holiday. Flights to L.A. are only once a week. Besides, Weiner lied to immigration when he gave a false name when he entered the country and applied for citizenship. I would think that's more serious."

He locked his hands over his enormous stomach. "If what you say is true."

I put the photograph of Weiner on the desk. "That's Weiner a.k.a. Villard. I visited him yesterday and made a positive I.D. He's wanted in the U.S. for embezzlement. I'm sure he also hired a couple of thugs last night to encourage me to leave him alone by leaving the coun-

try." I filled him in on the incident outside the restaurant.

"Why didn't you report it to the police?"

I shrugged. "What good would it have done? I couldn't identify the men, and no serious damage was done."

"It is still a crime, and you should have reported it," he said petulantly.

"Okay, I'm a bad boy. But what about Weiner?"

He thought for a moment, then pushed himself laboriously out of his chair. He plucked his police hat from a hat rack and said, "Perhaps we should go speak with Mr. Villard and see what he has to say about all this."

We drove in his police car to Villard's place. Nobody responded to Topou's knock. He knocked again, then tried the handle, and pushed open the door.

Weiner was lying on his side in front of the drawing table.

His head was surrounded by a large halo of blood that had coagulated on the floor. A bloody wrench, to which were stuck strands of dark hair, lay on the floor next to the body.

Topou bent down and looked at the body. "He appears to have been dead for at least six or seven hours."

I looked around the room. The first thing that struck me was the empty dual easels. "There

were two paintings here yesterday. They're gone now."

Topou looked up at me. "What kind of paintings?"

"One was a nude of Weiner's girlfriend, Davina. I don't know about the other one. It was covered up."

That seemed to interest him. He went back to the body, and I moved over to the drawing table. Aside from brushes and the normal tubes of oil paints were several items that looked out of place: a half-used roll of clear plastic, a hairdryer plugged into the wall by an extension cord, a spray can of acrylic primer, and an assortment of cans of acrylic latex paint.

Topou stood up. "You come with me."

He led me back out to his car and put me in the front seat, then called in to the station to send some men out. He told me to stay put, then went back into the house. A few minutes later, four police cars pulled up in front, and a group that looked like the Four Stooges-Tonga Style piled into the house. By the time two of the Stooges emerged from the house ten minutes later, a crowd of curious neighbors had gathered out front. The two cops took out their notepads and began circulating through the onlookers.

One of them, a tall, lanky kid, was talking with an old lady

wearing a woven mat over her wraparound skirt. She must have told him something exciting because he tore off into the house.

Topou came out and opened the car door. "I'm having one of my men drive you back to your hotel, but don't leave town."

I was escorted to another car and driven back to the Dateline, where I sat in the lounge, imbibed a couple of double vodkas, and contemplated the events of the day. I'd been contemplating for a few hours and several more vodkas when Daniel wandered through the lobby and spied me.

"They've arrested Mika for the murder of that Villard," he told me. "A neighbor saw him running from the house early this morning. They say he killed Villard to keep him away from Davina. But I can't believe it."

"What is your cousin saying about it?"

"He told Davina that he went over to talk to Villard and when he got there he found him dead. He got scared and ran." He paused. "You're a trained detective, Mr. Asch. Isn't there something you can do to help my cousin? I would consider it a personal favor."

I thought about it. "Let's talk to Davina."

He smiled widely. "She's in

the car. We just came from the police station."

We walked outside and got into the taxi. The girl looked older than yesterday but just as pretty, even with eyes swollen from crying. After she reiterated what Daniel had already told me, I asked, "Did Mika take the painting of you?"

She looked at me strangely. "No. Why would he do that?"

"To get rid of an embarrassment. The painting on the other easel—the one under the cloth—what was it of?"

"It was the same as the other one."

That one stopped me momentarily. "He was doing two identical paintings? Why?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. He was hired through the Pirics Gallery by a rich foreigner to do two paintings."

It didn't make any sense. At least, yet. "Who was the man?"

"His name was Delon. I think he's French. He has a yacht anchored in the harbor. Jon went out to see him a few days ago. He took me along." She paused. "He was a strange man. I didn't like him."

I told Daniel to drive to the Pirics Gallery and had them both wait in the cab while I went to the front door. The sign on the window said CLOSED, but I spied Gerard Pirics moving around inside and tapped on the

window. He pointed to the sign but I tapped again, and he made a face and came to the door.

"What is it?" he asked irritably, holding the door open but blocking my entrance.

"I'm not an art collector, Mr. Pirics. I'm a private investigator. I was hired to find an American named Stanley Weiner and bring him or the five hundred thousand dollars he embezzled back to the States. Weiner was Villard."

"That's absurd."

"Not really. Apparently Weiner always fancied himself a painter and wanted to trot off to the South Pacific like Gauguin."

He seemed to start at what I'd said, just what part of it I wasn't sure, but then he regained his composure and said, "You said 'was.'"

"He's dead. Somebody caved his head in with a wrench."

He looked shocked. A little too shocked, I thought. The shock turned wary. "What is it you want from me?"

"You arranged for Villard to paint two identical nudes of his girlfriend. You arranged it for a man named Delon. Can you tell me why?"

He gave me a confused look. "Two?"

"That's what his girlfriend says."

He shrugged. "Delon came into the gallery, liked Jon's work,

and asked me to arrange a meeting. He said he wanted to commission a painting, he didn't say what of. And he never mentioned anything about two works. He promised me my normal gallery fee, so I put him in touch with Jon. What happened after that I have no idea."

"You know anything about this Delon?"

"Only that he's from Marseilles and has plenty of money."

I paused purposely and studied his face. "The paintings are missing."

His expression remained blank. "That's a matter for the police. Now, if you'll excuse me—"

I glanced over to the table, where an Air New Zealand ticket jacket lay. "Going somewhere?"

His eyes narrowed. "What business is that of yours?"

"None. Being nosey is an occupational habit."

I walked out and got back in the cab. Something tugged at the edges of my memory, jarred loose by our conversation.

The library was on the ground floor of the Basilica of St. Anthony, and it took me about ten minutes of combing through local newspapers to find what I'd been looking for. It was a major article about an art theft that had occurred from the Gauguin Museum in Tahiti three weeks

ago. One of Gauguin's paintings, *Nevermore*, which had been on loan to the museum from the Home House Trust in London, had been stolen during a burglary. The painting, a nude study of a Polynesian girl reclining on a bed, had been insured for a cool million bucks, but some experts thought the piece would have brought much more on the open market. Things were starting to come together.

Captain Topou was squeezed into the chair behind his desk eating from a carton of Chinese takeout. He didn't look particularly pleased to see me. "I called you at the hotel."

I sat down. "I was busy trying to find out who killed Weiner."

He dismissed that with a wave of his hand. "We already know who killed him."

"You've got the wrong man."

He scowled. "What makes you think so?"

"Whoever took those paintings is the killer."

"What makes those paintings so valuable? Villard wasn't that good an artist."

I pointed at the phone on the desk. "Make a couple of phone calls and I'll tell you."

The boat was a forty-five footer named something in French I couldn't translate. The driver of the launch maneuvered to the

gangway, and Topou and the two cops he'd brought stepped out ahead of me. We were halfway up the stairs when a blond man wearing a striped T-shirt that showed off his muscles appeared above us. "What do you want?"

"I want to talk to Mr. Delon. Police business."

Another man, thinner than the first, appeared at the first man's side.

Topou led the way up the gangway.

As I walked by the larger man, I stared down at his feet.

"What are you looking at?" he sneered.

"Just checking for lobster on your shoes."

He grunted something inaudible and led us down the companionway to a door. He stopped and knocked, and a voice inside told us to come in.

The room was a large salon paneled with burl wood and filled with plush furniture covered with burgundy velvet. A tall, angular man stood at one end of the bar with a drink in his hand. He had a sharp-featured face with graying hair pomaded and slicked back from his high forehead. He was neatly dressed in white slacks, white shoes, and a burgundy smoking jacket that matched the furniture.

"Mr. Delon?" Topou asked.

"That's right," he said with a pronounced French accent. "What is this about?"

I pointed to the painting of Weiner's girlfriend hanging behind the bar. "That."

He turned to glance casually at the nude. "What about it?"

"That painting was stolen from Jon Villard's studio late last night."

"That's ridiculous," Delon said, trying to sound offended. "I paid five hundred dollars for that painting. I can show you a bill of sale if you'd like."

"Please," Topou said.

Delon shrugged and went to a desk on the other side of the room. From a drawer he took out a piece of paper and handed it to Topou. It was a receipt for five hundred dollars for *Nude*, signed by Jon Villard. "When did you get the painting?" Topou asked.

"Last night. Villard delivered it personally."

"Is that when he asked you to send your two goons here to thump me?"

Delon's face remained impassive. "My men were on board this boat all last night."

"Sure," I said.

"You were in Tahiti three weeks ago," Topou interjected. "You flew in from Paris to Papeete, met your boat, which was anchored in the harbor, and sailed here."

"Is that a crime?" Delon asked amusedly.

"Coincidentally, at that time a Gauguin nude was stolen from the Gauguin Museum," I offered.

He shrugged. "So?"

"When I saw the artists' supplies at Villard's place, I began to think, What would an artist who works with oils want with acrylic paints, plastic wrap, and a hairdryer? It didn't make any more sense than the fact that Villard was painting two identical pictures. Then it came to me. Acrylic paint is elastic, and with the proper primer it will stick to a plastic surface. A plastic surface that was shrink-wrapped onto canvas by using a hairdryer."

Delon waved a hand in the air. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You cut a deal with Pirics to commission an artist to do a job for you. You wanted someone to paint over a stolen Gauguin so you could get it out of the country. It must have struck Villard as a bit of irony to paint his own nude over Gauguin's."

"This is fantastic," Delon protested. "I bought an original Villard. That's all."

"That's what I think, too," I said. "Shall we check and find out?"

I walked behind the bar and took down the painting. Delon

began to look a little nervous as I popped the picture out of the frame. I showed Topou where the plastic was wrapped around the edge. "Anybody got a knife?"

One of the two cops took out a pocket knife and handed it to me. The bigger of Delon's men took a step forward, but Topou drew his gun. "Stay right there."

Delon watched anxiously as I cut the plastic wrap off the back of the stretcher. He couldn't help but let out a gasp when he saw the blank canvas underneath. I smiled. "Looks like you got suckered, Delon."

"Interpol has a file on you," Topou informed him. "You've been suspected of smuggling for years."

"I have never been convicted of a crime—"

"We'll see if we can remedy that," Topou said. "You and your men will please accompany us ashore."

The taxi pulled up in front of the airport terminal at three thirty in the morning, and Pirics got out. Topou and his men waited until the cab driver got his luggage out of the trunk before moving in.

"I'll take that," Topou told the stunned art dealer, reaching for the crated painting.

"I have a flight to catch—"
Pirics tried unconvincingly.

"You won't be catching any flights for a long time," Topou said. "You are under arrest for receiving stolen merchandise, attempted smuggling, and the murder of Jon Villard."

"That's preposterous," Pirics stammered.

"Not really," I said. "You were approached by Marcel Delon to find an artist to paint over a stolen Gauguin. I don't know why he picked you, but my guess is that you'd done business before. You arranged to have Villard do it. Then you or Villard got a bright idea. He would paint two identical paintings, pull a bait-and-switch, and split the proceeds with you, leaving Delon with the phony. Except greed got the better of you, and you killed him after he delivered the fake painting to Delon."

"I want to talk to my lawyer," Pirics said as they put the cuffs on him.

Topou waved Pirics' airline ticket at me. "You sure you don't want to take his seat?"

"You'll be getting rid of me soon enough, don't worry. Anyway, what are you bitching about? I made you a hero. You've recovered a world treasure."

He beamed as the publicity possibilities hit him.

*

The stolen Gauguin was returned to Tahiti with great fanfare, Captain Topou got a special commendation from the king, and Pirics spilled his guts, claiming he'd killed Weiner in self-defense.

I spent most of the rest of the week looking for the bank's money, to no avail. According to Davina, Weiner was usually busted out between paintings and had confided to her that he'd "once been rich," but had blown his money on bad investments. The president of the bank didn't care for that news but seemed at least consoled by the fact that Weiner was dead and they wouldn't have to go to the trouble of extradition proceedings.

Daniel drove me to the airport and carried my bag to the Air New Zealand counter, where we shook hands. "Well, goodbye, brudda, and *malo*," which I'd learned during my stay was Tongan for "thanks."

The immigration inspector stamped my passport and asked, "How was your stay in Tonga?"

"Very relaxing."

"Come back again," he said, smiling.

"I'm thinking of becoming a citizen," I told him. "I just have to learn how to paint."

FICTION

An Equitable Distribution

Daryl Gregory



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 10/97

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Though I think I made life miserable for the boys at PackRite Moving. More than once I'd be driving past the Freugstaff place on my way home and see their truck out front. I think the old woman worked them like mules. She was all alone in the house, after all, and some people need projects.

Mrs. Freugstaff was happy, and I was happy.

Until she died.

When I got the news, I had the usual moment of surprise and the not-so-usual moment of guilt (I always feel vaguely responsible when someone I dislike dies, as if I'd made it happen through psychic voodoo). And then my stomach knotted. What had I gotten myself into? I was going to have to inventory the house and note the location of each item, then preside over the whole strange distribution process.

On my way home that night I drove by the Freugstaff mansion. It was a big place sprawled on its hill like a black condor, the windows dark. The inventory would take me forever.

Then I saw a light bobbing behind one of the windows. I braked hard and backed up. My first thought, of course, was burglars. Then a nastier possibility occurred to me. The knot in my stomach twisted a little tighter.

I jogged to the front door and tried the knob; it was unlocked. I slowly pushed it open. From across the dark room I heard grunting, then a curse.

I found the light switch against the wall and flipped on the lights. A middle-aged woman spun to face me. Behind her a wing-backed leather armchair was suspended in the door frame, jammed sideways.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"I'm the lawyer," I said. "Who are you?"

"I'm the niece. Frieda."

I pointed to the chair. "What are you doing with that?"

"It *belongs*," she said petulantly, "in the laundry room."

A woman screamed from upstairs.

"Put that chair back where it came from," I said, then ran up the steps, taking them two at a time.

The woman screamed again, and a man screamed back. Lights went on in a room down the hall. It was the library. An orange-haired woman in leopardskin pants was pitching books at a red-bearded, balding man who was fending off the hardbacks with a sil-



It was my idea, so I guess in some way I'm to blame. But come on: it was a *joke*. I never thought she'd take me seriously, and no one could have guessed what it would lead to, or what would happen to that beautiful mansion.

Is it my fault Mrs. Freugstaff's family was a pack of raving psychos?

Every time one of them offended or embarrassed Mrs. Freugstaff—and this was not a rare occurrence—she came in to change her will. In the two years since I'd been suckered into taking her on as a client, I'd added dozens of amendments and revisions. Her grandson William the congressman would be indicted, so she'd decide that he shouldn't have the teak grandfather clock after all, and she'd revise the will to transfer it to William's sister Judith. And then Judith would date a drug kingpin, or appear on a daytime talk show, and Mrs. Freugstaff would take away the clock and the china and the silver and give some of it back to William and some of it to her nephew Frankie. Then Frankie would miss his parole hearing . . . you get the picture.

I tried to be patient. I did. But when she showed up that Friday with another copy of the will marked up and annotated like the battle plan to D-Day, I lost it. I leaned across the table, both hands gripping my pen so I wouldn't strangle her.

"Mrs. Freugstaff," I said slowly, "how about this. Why don't you give one room in your house to each relative. Then, when you want to change your mind about who should get what, you could just move it to another room."

I don't know what I expected her to do. Maybe slap me. Maybe stomp out and find another lawyer (hope against hope).

Instead she blinked twice and said in a dead-serious voice, "I like that. I like that quite a bit."

Okay, maybe as her attorney I shouldn't have drawn up the papers for such a queer deal. But once Mrs. Freugstaff latched onto the idea, she wouldn't let go. And it *was* my idea.

It was pretty simple. William got the library. Judith got the dining room. Each one of her relatives got a room, down to each of the twelve bathrooms, the pool cabana, and the gardener's shed. Even Frankie, then out of favor with Mrs. Freugstaff for assaulting his appeal judge, got his own piece of the pie.

And after the initial paperwork Mrs. Freugstaff didn't darken my door again.

~~~~~  
ver tea tray and a flashlight. I recognized him as Representative William Freugstaff (R-Illinois).

"That was in *my* room!" the woman yelled, and lunged for the tray. William stumbled back, silverware falling out of his pockets.

"What's going on here?" I said in my best authority-figure voice.

The two of them crashed to the floor. "Get her *off* of me!" William grunted.

A teenage boy with a microwave in his arms stepped into the room, froze for a moment, and backed out.

William raised an eyebrow.

"I think that's Eunice's boy," the woman supplied. "Teddy."

"Wait a minute!" I said. "Do you smell gas?"

We all looked, for some reason, at the ceiling.

Definitely gas.

"Everybody out!" I yelled. "Now!" I didn't wait for them to follow. I practically jumped down the flight of stairs and hit the front door at a run. In less than a minute a score of Freugstaff descendants stumbled into the yard after me.

"Somebody call the fire department," I said. "Go to one of the neighbors!"

"As long as there's not a *spark* or something," said the orange-haired woman, "it should be—"

The explosion was deafening. I fell to the ground, covering my head. Debris rained down: wood, bricks, cookware, ceramic figurines. A toaster landed inches from my face.

In a few minutes we picked ourselves up and looked around. No one seemed seriously hurt. The yard looked like a battlefield. The mansion was a flaming ruin.

A figure walked towards us out of the smoke.

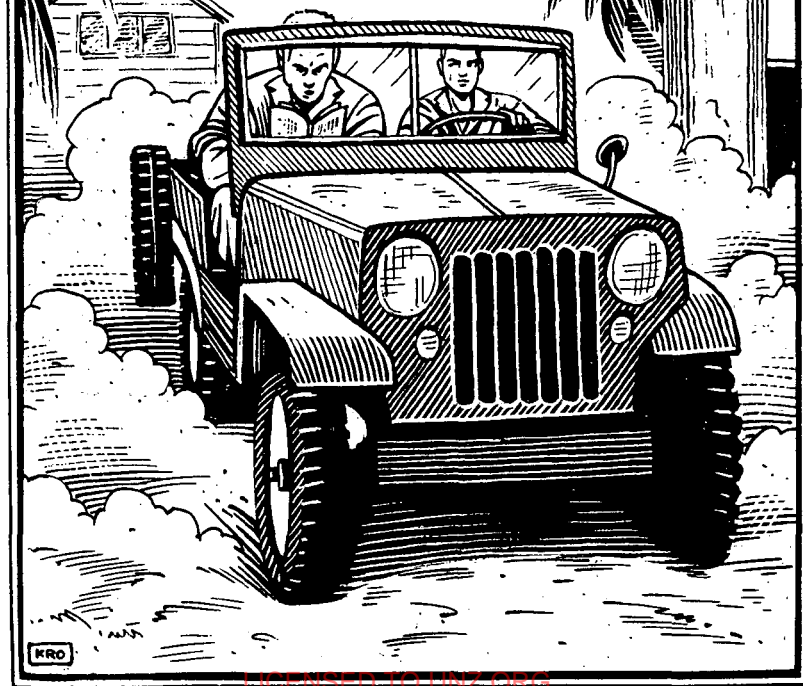
"Frankie!" William said. "You're out of jail?"

Frankie planted his foot on an overturned toilet and lit a cigarette with a shiny gold lighter. "Everything in this yard," he said, "is mine."

FICTION

# The Last Martians

Gary  
Alexander



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**O**nly General Westmoreland and his deputy commander had air-conditioned cars, chauffeured Dodge sedans out of the navy motor pool. The rest of the brass sweltered like us peons.

This was 1965, early in the war, before Uncle Sam shipped over everybody except women and children. The locals, they'd still stare at you and your round eyes like you were one of Ziggy's Martians. The buildup was starting, yeah, but if your number was up, you were as likely to have your bar stool blasted out from under you as you were of catching a Vietcong bullet between the eyes.

Anything that kept you cool was scarce. Window air conditioners were scarcer'n scarce. What was available was hand-me-down garbage. That's how come me and Ziggy got to score brownie points with the major. These days you'd call it your basic crime of opportunity, but to us it was a miracle. Sitting there on the back of the Air Force flatbed was a GE as big as a console TV, brand-spanking-new in its box.

Saigon traffic wasn't budging. Bicycles, cars, trucks, cyclos, tanks, scooters, you name it. Heat waves and stinking exhaust boiled up in the air. Whoever named this town the Pearl of the Orient done so before my time.

Ziggy walked over and untied the straps holding down the unit. The driver was making noise and shaking his fist and opening his door. I went to the cab and booted it shut.

The poor bastard looked at me and looked through his mirror at Ziggy. If you've ever seen Ziggy, you'd know why the airman's eyes got big. I'm no ninety-seven pound weakling. Kick sand in my face and you're gonna die, but Ziggy went six four, six five, and was cone-shaped. If he was of a mind to shave his chest and back, he'd need a lawn mower. He lifted the box up on the top of his head and walked off to the next street like it was an empty carton.

The airman just stared straight ahead, drumming fingers on the wheel, waiting for the traffic to loosen up. This was a scared kid with a wedding ring on. He was an Airman First, a two-striper drawing a hundred bucks a month. He didn't say squat. No way was he gonna die over a piece of government property.

After me and Ziggy installed the thing in the window behind the major's desk and cranked it up to full blast, the major closed his eyes, tugged his pockets till his shirt flapped against his skinny chest, and cooed like a pigeon.

"Nice work, men," he said. "I

do believe you are qualified to assume more responsibility."

The major had soft pale skin and a pencil neck. He'd flown Hueys in the Delta, and now he'd been transferred to MACV to fly a desk. There were rumors of white knuckles at the stick.

"Yes, sir," I said.

Ziggy didn't say nothing. Ziggy didn't speak unless spoke to and sometimes not then.

"I'm cutting orders changing your MOS's to clerk typist and assigning you permanent party to this office."

Ziggy grunted. The major had seen our personnel jackets. He knew what he had, a pair of duds who wouldn't know which side of an Underwood was up. I was a lifer with seven years in and zippers on my sleeves; I'd been busted back more times than Carter's got pills. Ziggy was a first-termer on the ragged edge of a Section Eight from the day he raised his right hand.

Me and Ziggy had one thing in common. We come from the days when if you were hauled before the judge he had the slack to let you pick between the pokey and the recruiting station.

Another thing in common. Nobody wanted or trusted us. I was a cook, and Ziggy was an ammo loader. They had us pegged as a couple of goof-offs who could get them killed faster than Charlie, either poisoned or blowed to

smithereens, and they were probably right.

We bounced here and there, winding up at USMACV-COIN-FLIPS unassigned, doing various dirty details on account of nobody knew what else to do with us.

Clerk typist beat the hell out of cleaning latrines and humping the tons of mimeograph and typing and carbon paper they went through up and down the stairs here, but I had to break the news:

"Sir, me and Private Zbitgysz, we don't know how to type."

"As you were, Hudson," the major said, fluttering a soft, bony hand. "I say you're typists, you're typists."

"Yes, sir."

"As you men are aware, the enemy is escalating the war. Consequently, because of the rapid buildup, various matériel is in short supply."

Saying "the enemy" like he'd been in hand-to-hand with Charlie. I nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Senior officers require transportation." He snapped his fingers. "When they require it. The colonel, for instance. He has to submit a requisition for the use of a jeep. Days in advance. It's pathetic."

The major worked for the colonel, who worked for the general. COINFLIPS was a couple of blocks down from the main

MACV HQ, around the corner on Hong Thap Tu Street in an old building left over from the French. The stucco came off in gobs, every inch of the floors creaked, and the red roof tile was scuzzy green from mold. It smelled like they'd garrisoned the Foreign Legion.

COINFLIPS stood for Counterinsurgency Force and Logistics Input Projection Section, a typical army mouthful. You pronounced it co-inf-lips. It was what they called a "think tank." Since in the real army there wasn't much thinking in general going on, COINFLIPS was an oddball unit.

Every guy in the outfit including the enlisted men had college, except me and Ziggy who between us spent a grand total of about five minutes in high school. COINFLIPS wrote reports and more reports on counterinsurgency and interdiction and agitprop and psywar and troop requirements.

It was crystal ball stuff. The reports were thick as phone books and had a lot of numbers, the mathematical kind. They'd route them to other MACV units and Stateside and out to the field, where I knew the troops must've been dying to read them.

If the major wanted us to go and steal a jeep for the colonel, I wished he'd just spit it out, but

the major wouldn't say cow pie if he had a mouthful.

"It's ironic that as vital as we are, critical to the war effort, we have to beg for every crumb." He stopped and fanned himself in the cool breeze with an interoffice memo. "You men, with the ingenuity you displayed, I thought perhaps you might have alternative sources."

I guess this was his version of spitting it out. I said yes, sir, maybe we did. He was acting like boosting a jeep was a big deal. They're the easiest rig in the world to steal. A monkey with a screwdriver could be tail-lights down the road in sixty seconds flat. And me and Ziggy, we'd been hotwiring cars since we was on mother's milk.

We went out to Tan Son Nhut Airbase and scouted the USARV compound. We took the pick of the litter, which had decent tires and not too many dents. It was parked next to a conex container that had such a dinky padlock that Ziggy said they were just asking for it. There was a lot of crap piled inside, but we found us a case of Spam and an M-14 with five full clips.

We drove downtown to this East Indian tailor we knew whose main business was changing money, Vietnamese piastres for dollars at twice the legal rate. He wasn't too crazy about the lunchmeat but swooned when he

saw the weapon and ammo. He paid us in piastres and a half gallon jug of Johnny Walker Red Label, which we kept as a finder's fee for the jeep.

We ground off the serial numbers, stenciled new unit markings over the old, and delivered the jeep. We'd been gone under three hours. The major looked at us like we walked on water. Two days later he promoted us from private to pfc.

The major didn't have any typing for us to do. He said he was putting us on standby for special projects, so we had a lot of free time on our hands. Mostly we laid around the room, sucking on the Johnny Red and catching up on our z's.

Ziggy was okay company. We kept finding things in common. I came from a broken home in Portland, Oregon, where nobody gave a damn about nobody. Ziggy was a native of Detroit. He never knew his father, and his three brothers all had different pops. Me, I'd found me a home in the army. Ziggy, too. He was going to re-up if they let him.

Now, as I said before, Ziggy was the strong, silent type. Unless, that is, you got him going on the subject of Mars, in which case he had diarrhea of the mouth.

"You don't think this is serious, Huddy?"

We were kicked back on our bunks. Ziggy's as usual was littered with the pulp magazines and comic books, those kind with babes and space monsters on the cover. Ziggy told me he'd liked sci-fi for as long as he could remember, but I don't think he'd ever got extra weird about it until lately with that space satellite we'd sent up that was closing in on the planet Mars.

"You know more about the situation than me," I said careful-like. You didn't want to piss Ziggy off.

"Damn straight," Ziggy said. "All you gotta do is look at them encyclopedia pictures. The fertile red soil, them canals and ice caps, then tell me there ain't life on Mars."

Well, I wasn't arguing there wasn't life on Mars. The canal gondolas and high priests and zombies packing ray guns in Ziggy's reading material, I wasn't buying that. I was thinking more on the line of critters that looked like a five hundred pound side order of potato salad. Critters with small brains and big feet. Like Ziggy.

If I'd had my druthers, Ziggy'd shut up, and I'd go on doing what I was doing, maintaining a buzz while I watched the fan go round and round and wonder how come the geckos that walked on the ceiling never fell

off. Meanwhile Ziggy read up on his little green men and did a lot of thinking, for him an unnatural act. We had too damn much time on our hands.

"It's a matter of days till Mariner 4's close enough to be clicking some photos," he said, filling my pregnant pause.

"Uh-huh."

"Then they'll see."

This is where it really got strange. I didn't know if it was him or the Johnny Red talking.

"What would you do if you was in charge of Earth and a Martian ship came into orbit and started clicking pitchers? What, Huddy, what?"

"Well, I'd be pissed. They ought to be minding their own beeswax."

"You ever see *War of the Worlds*?"

"Yeah. Scary."

Ziggy'd told me once that he had a metal plate in his head. This hack in a reformatory had caved in the side of his skull with a Louisville Slugger during a riot. Ziggy bragged that he bounced off the bars and dropped to a knee but never went down for the count.

"There you go. These VC, they're small potatoes compared to them Martians. Damn straight!"

I couldn't argue with that, so I didn't.

The major called us in. Some-

thing was different, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

"Are you men smokers?"

"No, sir," we chorused. Odd as it seems, that was one bad habit me and Ziggy somehow bypassed.

"Good. Excellent. I thought not. Nor am I. Come on, let's saddle up, men. We have a job to do."

The major sprang out of his chair like a toy jack-in-the-box. It registered what was different. The major had sweat circles under his pits, and the air conditioner was gone.

"Hey," I said, pointing at the bare naked window. "Sir?"

The major, I swear, was pouting. He said, "As you were, Hudson. I do not wish to talk about it."

I snuck a peek in the colonel's office on the way out. The GE was in his window, purring like a kitten. I didn't blame the major for having his nose out of joint, but I didn't think that air conditioning was all that was bothering him.

We went outside to the colonel's jeep, which I guess was the major's jeep after all. The major told me to drive and Ziggy to ride shotgun. He sat in the back, swiveling his head, making eye contact with GI's so they'd have to salute him and he could return the salutes. He must of felt like

Westmoreland and maybe even Patton.

He gave us directions to his BOQ. He went in, and we sat twiddling our thumbs in the heat for a solid half hour. Ziggy pulled this magazine out of his pocket with this thing from Jupiter on the cover that looked like a cabbage. Ziggy read while we waited, only sometimes moving his lips. He carried his sci-fi around like some guys did chewing gum and candy.

The major came out wearing jungle fatigues and an Aussie bush hat. He had on this cologne that smelled like a Tijuana whorehouse. Ziggy'd hold his nose when the major was looking away snapping off a salute, and we'd about crack up.

Next stop was the navy PX. The major handed us some twenties and told us what to do. You were entitled to five cartons of PX cigarettes per month. They went for a buck and a quarter a carton, and you could get triple that on the black market, which was why they rationed them. Me and Ziggy and the major bought five cartons of Salems each. We bought as much Tide detergent as we could carry in the jeep. The major also bought Louisiana hot sauce, Crown Royal whisky, frozen chicken parts, canned peaches, and Tampax and held the bag on his lap.

The major pointed us toward Cholon, Saigon's Chinese district. Ziggy winked, letting me know he knew what was going on, too. Tide and Salems were the nylons and chocolates of the Vietnam War.

We had to wait on this street that was an alley while the major ducked through this doorway with his contraband. The locals, they'd be squatting in the alley or walking by, staring at us except not at us, more like through us.

The major took his own sweet time. Ziggy read, and I didn't do nothing. What the major had going inside got me to thinking about *Terry and the Pirates*, you know, the comic strip. Got me to thinking about the Dragon Lady, that gorgeous Chinese moll with the long silk dresses and the cigarette holder.

I said something to Ziggy, and he jabbed a finger at the cover picture on the magazine he was reading, an amazon in tights who was cracking a whip. The She Devil of Alpha Centauri, Ziggy said. The major's girl, she gotta be that fine.

We were in the process of making a bet whether the major's sweetie looked more like the Dragon Lady or the She Devil when he come lurching outside, drunker'n a skunk, hitching up his pants, that dumb-ass hat of his on side-



ways. This girl come out after him, cackling and pinching his skinny backside.

We both lost the bet. She was an okay-looking Viet in black pajamas but nothing extra special, no big improvement over the horsefaced wife he'd got a picture of on his desk. The major, a juicer and a skirt chaser. He was getting to be an education.

He didn't say diddly to us and was snoring when we got to the BOQ. We poured him out and went to the office. This gung-ho sergeant jumped us and asked us where the hell we been. I told him we was on a special project. He knew we were tight with the major, so he didn't push it. He told us the colonel wanted to see us right away, ASAP-SAP.

The colonel was a recruiting poster. Lean and mean, he had more hair on his arms than on his head. He had on this West Point class ring big enough to be brass knucks. His boots and brass blinded you, and you could cut a mess hall steak with the creases in his fatigues.

The colonel didn't say nothing to start with, which was good on account of the racket the air conditioner was making. The new GE was gone, and in its place was this piece of junk that sounded like a B-17 in a World War II movie.

He had our personnel jackets on his desk. He picked them up

and let them drop, making a face like he'd stepped in something.

"How the hell did you two duds ever get into this man's army?"

"Judge Rosenweig made me," Ziggy said.

The colonel shook his head and directed his comments to me, realizing I was the smart one.

"You know, entire American units are being deployed in-country," he said. "Victor Charles is on the run. His tail is between his legs."

"Yes, sir."

"It's a mopping-up situation for us and our South Vietnamese allies."

"Yes, sir."

"Hudson, are you and Pfc. Zbitgysz bored with Saigon gravy duty?"

"No, sir. We truly ain't."

"If you are, I can reclassify your MOS's. Eleven bravo ten. Light weapons infantryman."

"Yes, sir," I said. "No, sir."

It wasn't five degrees cooler in here than out on the street. Me and Ziggy were sweating like hogs. The colonel wasn't sweating, but then the colonel didn't sweat.

"We have plenty of enemy left to kill, however."

"Yes, sir."

"The major informs me that you men are resourceful."

I had to give the right answer or our ass was grass. "Yes, sir. Whatever it is you need, we can do."

The colonel cocked a thumb at the air conditioner and looked down at some stuff on his desk so he didn't have to look me in the eye. He said, "I requisitioned a replacement unit. Put a trace on the paperwork and see how the request is moving along."

Ziggy grunted. I said yes, sir, yes, sir. We saluted and got the hell out of there. We took the long way past the general's office to test out a theory.

The general didn't look like a real general. He looked like a dad in a TV series. The major told us the general was the smartest man he knew. The general was a genius who went to college for like ten years, which was why I guess he was in charge of writing those reports.

The general wasn't in, but the GE was, purring like a kitten. Ziggy said it wasn't fair. I told Ziggy that when you been in the army as long as me you know there ain't no such thing as fair. What there is is RHIP: Rank Has Its Privileges. The general had the major's air conditioner. The colonel had the general's old air conditioner. The major didn't have nothing.

And we had us a sideways order to go out and cough up another miracle. Which don't

grow on trees. They had window units for sale out at the PX, but they cost an arm and a leg. What we did was take the colonel's jeep that I don't blame the major for not giving to him.

We drove it to our East Indian tailor. He bought the jeep for piastres, for a lot less than it was worth, chattering about the risk and the repainting cost, blah blah blah. The PX didn't take P's, so he changed the Viet funny money back for dollars. The little twerp hustled us twice. Then he had the nerve to whip a wish list on us. He was in the market for Crisco, Pall Malls, dental floss, M-79 grenade launchers, Budweiser, and .38 Smith and Wessons. We were royally pissed but said we'd keep our eyes open.

We hopped a taxi out to Tân Sơn Nhut to boost another jeep, since we didn't have any way to get the air conditioner from the PX to the office. Ziggy had bought an English-language *Saigon Post* from a newsstand to read. He was reading everything he could find that had news of his space satellite. Now he was in an uproar.

"You read this, Huddy? Did you read this?"

"When's the last time you seen me reading a paper, Ziggy?"

"You ought to. Listen up. This

scientist is saying not to expect a whole lot from Mariner 4. He says Mars is cold and got a thin atmosphere. Mars don't have no water and nitrogen, which you gotta have for life, according to this specta-, specter-, spectro-, spectrographic analysis thing they done. Ain't that some garbage?"

"Well, Ziggy, the guy's a scientist, some kinda brain."

"Mariner 4 ain't there yet, so he oughta wait for the pitchers before he opens his trap. The Martians, his ass'll be the first they fry. Damn straight!"

The jeep we poached was a rat. It had a bad knock and a shimmy in the front end. We left it around the corner from the office, an invite for it to be stole, which it was. We stuck the air conditioner in the colonel's window and took and stuck the rattletrap in the major's window, which we figured was better than nothing and the major oughtta be happy.

I think the colonel was happy, except he didn't say boo or even look at us. He couldn't pretend we were good soldiers, so he pretended we weren't there. And if we wasn't there, the stink of theft and blackmarket and whatnot wouldn't rub off on him.

But the major wasn't happy. He was sourpussed about damn near everything, and his mind was a million miles away. He

was taking off most every day at lunchtime, signing out to go out in the field, which was a crock because nobody in COIN-FLIPS ever went out in the field. The major was sweaty and had the shakes. Since he was in a fog when he wasn't gone, he didn't have any special projects for us.

Everybody else in COIN-FLIPS that outranked us, which was everybody, did, though. We were moving paper around like you couldn't believe. The reports were thicker than before, and they were in envelopes marked TOP SECRET. Everybody scrambled around like they had feathers tickling their butts. These bundles were going off to high places, too. Everybody seemed to know what was going on except me and Ziggy.

We weren't what you'd call ideal security risks, but we had strong backs. I didn't mind the work and long hours. It made the time pass, and it sort of kept Ziggy's mind off Mars, which he said Mariner 4 was almost close enough to snapshot.

One day out of curiosity we followed the major when he checked out to go in the field. Surprise, surprise, the field turned out to be a dive. It was called the Lulu Snack Bar. The Lulu was a couple of blocks off Tu Do Street, between a massage joint and a tattoo parlor.

The major was by himself in a corner chugging a bottle of Biere 33 like he'd been stranded in a desert. This was a tasty local brew that did some wicked things to your head the next A.M. The girls weren't hustling him to buy them Saigon teas, which meant they knew him. The rascal was a regular.

We went up to him and sort of stood at attention.

The major looked up and blinked, like he was having trouble recognizing us.

"Hudson. Are you on duty?"

I wasn't sure if my special projects was on duty or not. "We was worried about you, sir."

"Take a seat."

The major raised his empty. In a second this cutie in a Suzy Wong dress had cold ones in front of us. If the South Vietnamese army moved as quick as the Saigon bar folk did, they wouldn't need us to whip Charlie's butt for them.

"I should be a happy man, but I'm not," the major said, staring at me.

I looked next to me, and Ziggy wasn't there. I remembered him saying there was a newsstand across the street he wanted to check out for late editions.

"Well, sir, it seems to me that maybe you oughtta be at least a little bit happy."

He gave me a sad smile. "Why is that, Hudson?"

"Well, sir, you're an officer. You got an important job. You got a family back home. You got—"

I stopped myself.

"Ah, you're referring to my assignation. I never did thank you men for your cooperation, not to mention your cigarette rations. It's difficult for a local national to make ends meet these days."

I didn't know what that assign-word meant, but I knew what he was talking about. I just shrugged.

"There lies the crux of my dilemma, Pfc. Hudson. Have you ever had the misfortune to meet the girl of your dreams?"

I looked over at Ziggy, who was still gone. Me and Ziggy, the girl of our dreams was one who wouldn't give us a disease.

"I don't think so, sir."

He sighed. "My Waterloo."

I hated it when a guy sighed, especially when he was an officer. "Sir, would you please spit out what's bugging you?"

He whipped an arm toward the bar like he was swatting a fly. "Feast your eyes, Pfc. Hudson."

Up by the cash register was the mama-san where they always pulled sentry duty or otherwise they'd be stole blind, except she wan't any older than the girls, and she was cute, the pick of the litter. She looked fa-

miliar. Dolled up with mascara and a skintight Suzy Wong, it was her, the girl we took the major and his contraband to.

"She has a head on her shoulders too, Pfc. Hudson. Managing an establishment such as this is no picnic in a climate of graft and violence."

Bottoms up. I watched the major's Adam's apple bobbing. A fresh refill appeared like magic.

"Well, sir, seems to me, irregardless, you got it made in the shade."

He leaned forward and dropped his voice to a whisper. "As did I. Can you keep a secret? You don't have clearance. I'll go to Leavenworth if you can't."

"Sure."

"You've noticed the recent cloaking of secrecy at the office?"

"Uh-huh. Cloaking and dagger."

"The routing of those documents. To CINCPAC. The JCS. The DoD. Ultimately—"

His voice dropped even lower. I leaned forward.

"The White House."

I gulped.

"Hudson, the war is ending in six weeks."

"Ah hell, you mean the VC is gonna be marching into Saigon?"

The major slapped his forehead. "No, you dolt! We won. You process the documents.

Haven't you read the numbers, the trends?"

I gotta admit I wasn't paying much attention one way or the other to all that gobbledygook, but I couldn't tell the major that. "Yes, sir. I don't know, sir."

"We have seventy-five thousand troops in-country and building fast, Hudson. The breakeven point is eighty-three thousand five hundred thirty-five, after which our numerical advantage overwhelms the enemy. COINFLIPS sends the raw data to the Pentagon. They run it through a huge IBM machine. The force ratios, the ordnance tonnage multipliers, the negative psychological exponents. There is no mistake!"

The major guzzled down his beer. So as not to be rude, I did likewise.

"Well, sir, ain't that good news? We can be going home pretty soon. You can see your family—"

"And leave Mai." He swung his soft, sad, skinny face towards the bar. "And leave my Indochinese angel. I can't take her with me. I had anticipated another seven months of bliss with her until my normal tour ended. By then, perhaps I could have devised a plan to take her along."

A lot of them were dying to go home to the Land of the Big PX with a GI, but her, I dunno. She

was cackling with the other whores, not paying the major a lick of attention.

Just then Ziggy lumbered in, making the floorboards creak. He sat and threw a rolled-up magazine on the table. His eyes were red. I do believe he'd been crying.

"What's up, buddy?" I said.

"Lookie."

He handed me the magazine, a *Time*, one of them airmail editions where the pages were as thin as toilet paper. He'd opened it to a page with the title "The Moon-Faced Mars."

I didn't have to read the article. A picture took from Mariner 4 told the story. Nothing but craters and rough terrain. No canals, no oceans, no green valleys, no Martians. Mars was a rock, dead as a doornail.

"Hey, Zig," I said. "Good news. Right? No invasion from outer space."

The major was trying to focus on the article. "Invasion? What invasion? I told you, Hudson, we've won."

"They ain't there, Huddy. They ain't never been there."

"What are you talking about, Zbitgysz? They *are* there, throughout the countryside, but they have neither the resources nor the resolve—"

Ziggy was almost crying again. "Don't you see, Huddy? They was never there."

I tried to make him feel good. "C'mon, man. No radioactive death beams, none of that conquering and enslaving they do in your books. It's great news!"

"Death beams?" The major said. "Ridiculous. The Vietcong do not even possess aircraft."

It was dawning on me how come Ziggy was pissing and moaning. He'd rather the Martians came in and roasted us than not exist. His piles of sci-fi books, he believed they were real. I mean, not real. He ain't that stupid. But they *could be* real.

"Will you men make some sense?" The major demanded. "Am I the only sane and sober person at this table?"

Me and Ziggy, we didn't answer. We both saw it at the same time. The major, he couldn't of seen it because his back was to the door instead of the wall. The major was smart as a whip and dumb as a brick. What he couldn't see, what we did see, actually *didn't* see, was the major's girl and her bar girls. They'd vamoosed. We were alone, us and two guys on a motorbike out on the sidewalk, one climbing off, carrying something.

Ziggy came out of his chair with a banshee yell. I grabbed at him and yelled to get down, but he went charging for the door, still howling. The major



stood up and swiveled his halfwit head, asking what was Zbitgysz's problem, when the VC slung in a knapsack, a knapsack trailing sparks.

It was too late to do anything but try to save my own hide, so I hit the deck, knocking the major ass-over-teakettle outa his chair, riding him down with me. The knapsack bounced off Ziggy, and he kind of bobbed it, knocking it and kicking it outside.

You know what the real thing sounds like? Turn on a John Wayne movie, crank the volume all the way up, and stick an ear against a speaker. That's what a real-life explosion sounds like. The next three days all you hear is bells.

The shock wave slammed me into the back wall, but I was able to get up. I had all these shrapnel holes in me, like I'd slow-danced with a porcupine and I was gagging on the smoke, but I was pretty much okay. The major was curled up in the fetal position. He looked okay and probably was on account of I'd landed on top of him. I let him lay.

The whole front of the bar was blowed out, and Ziggy was staggering to his feet. The VC and their scooter were in pieces in the street. I couldn't believe Ziggy. He had this terrible, twisted expression; and he hadn't stopped howling. He had his

arms wrapped around himself, basically holding his insides in. He stumbled backwards and managed to turn as he hit the sidewalk, kersplat.

He was dead when I got to him. Least that's what they say, how I was screaming and crying and hugging his corpse, them having to peel my fingers off him even though I was passed out.

Me and the major was took to the same hospital. I was on my feet in no time, but the major, in for "observation," was playing it to the hilt, tubes in his arm and nose, the full nine yards. I went to visit him. Being an officer, naturally he was in a different wing. When it was just him and me in the room, I got real close and said he'd better put Ziggy in for a medal or them tubes in him, the doc, next time he comes in, he'd find 'em inserted in the other end.

The major wouldn't look me in the eye, wouldn't speak, so I took it for a yes. Some infection I'd picked up from the blast had taken a shine to my innards, so I was laid up seven weeks.

By the time they released me a lot of things had happened. The South Vietnamese generals who ran the country liked to play musical chairs. They'd had themselves another of their coo de tahs, and our brass was highly ticked off.

Would you believe COIN-FLIPS had been disbanded? The building was cleaned out, lock, stock, and barrel. I guess they'd forgot to tell Charlie he'd lost the war.

The major went berserk in the hospital. They shipped him off to Japan to dry out, and I heard tell they plastered electrodes to his head to jolt the goofiness out of him.

The colonel went into the field, where he belonged. He was a regimental commander whose unit kicked ass and took names.

I heard they also took ears.

The general, chief brain-stormer of COINFLIPS, got shipped Stateside, where he was given the command of a National Guard armory in Turpentine Springs, Arkansas. His career ain't gonna see the light of day anytime soon.

The major must of paid attention to me before they took him to the rubber room. Bronze Star citations came down for me and Ziggy both. I told them where they could shove mine and raised holy hell cuz Ziggy didn't at least get the Silver Star. As usual, I didn't do a damn bit of good, except I found this kindly personnel sergeant who found a maiden aunt of Ziggy's in Hamtramck where they could mail his medal to.

My clerk typist MOS stuck, and I been promoted to Spec 4. Air conditioning ain't any longer a problem, not as far as the Saigon brass is concerned. The other day I saw a barge floating up the Saigon River with the same GE units me and Ziggy swiped off that truck and bought at the PX. They was piled to the heavens.

But there's these new shortages. There's always something. I'm working for this new major. He's the same as the old one and different. He's the same where it counts; he's a paper-work warrior, and he's a chippy chaser with a thirst.

There's Armed Forces Television in Saigon now, and a good TV set's scarce and expensive. I picked up a nice twenty-one incher which I gave to my new major, which he gave to his cutie.

My new major said that if there were any more where that one came from, him and me could work something out. I went to see my East Injun tailor buddy, and he said maybe there were some nice TV's around. And would I know where he could put his hands on New York strip steaks, Vat 69 scotch, fingernail clippers, and automatic rifles with banana clips?

I said I'd see what I could do.

# MS FOUND IN A BEDPOST

David Braly



I have decided to make note of a peculiar set of circumstances that occurred last year in Boidburg, the village in the Grand Duchy of Baden where I am constable. I cannot honestly call it a case, for I have no evidence that an actual crime occurred, yet the events that I shall set forth certainly indicate to me that something quite bizarre did happen. Possibly a triple murder.

Until last year, or more specifically late May of 1891, I found few occurrences in Boidburg to challenge my intellect. I had been posted here as punishment after I arrested a young man for rowdiness and public drunkenness while I was serving as a police officer in Mannheim. It turned out that the offender was the bürgermeister's son. That I arrested him actually counted less against me than that I failed to recognize the progeny of so august a personage and that in making the arrest I referred to him as a "donkey-eared black-guard." The bürgermeister himself, it seems, has rather prominent ears. At any rate, the bürgermeister complained to the Grand Duke, and soon I was looking for crimes to investigate in this small village on the edge of the Black Forest. In three years the most intellectually challenging crime I had been forced to tackle was either the disappearance of Herr Kruger's bicycle or the murder of Frau Pintlau's pig. Frankly, I was never able to solve either case, but I am still investigating both. Although I loved the beauty of the country, and had met and married my wife Helga here, I feared that the lack of intellectual challenge was dulling my investigative skills and talents.

It was while that fear was uppermost in my thoughts that there came into our community a man of quite sinister appearance and behavior. He was tall; I would guess one and eight-tenths meters, although his thinness made him appear taller. He had a sharply faceted face with two piercing eyes set close together over a big curving nose. He wore the raiment of a gentleman but one who had seen better times, for the clothes were in disheveled condition with several awkwardly mended tears. His German was a non-Baden dialect, and I guessed that he was probably from one of the eastern states. He did not engage in the persiflage typical of tourists but rather stayed to himself and appeared to be of a moody or at least preoccupied disposition. Such was Herr Sigerson, a man in his late thirties who rented a room at Frau Arndt's inn.

The stranger's presence was known throughout the village and its environs within hours. Seldom does anyone other than the usual visitors rent a room at the inn, which is to say farmers who have

business or property here and relatives of people who live here. There are at most two dozen people who visit Boidburg year in and year out. Only rarely does a tourist from France, Italy, or England stop here while viewing the Black Forest. But although this man claimed to be a tourist, and in fact had walked up from the Swiss border as a number of tourists have done in the past, he had the shifty manner displayed by fugitives, anarchists, and revolutionaries. When I learnt these facts, I determined to keep an eye on the fellow until he had left Boidburg. Frau Arndt indicated that his departure would come soon because he had paid for only two nights' lodging.

"There's something very strange about that fellow who's staying at the inn," observed Herr Wirbel when he stopped me going into my office one morning. Wirbel, a man in his late fifties with flowing white hair and beard, had been a sergeant in the army and now served as Boidburg's postmaster. He was also its most active citizen and would have been the bürgermeister of Boidburg had Boidburg been large enough to have a bürgermeister.

"What has he done?" I looked down the street towards the inn, but there was nobody in sight there. "Has he departed yet?"

"No, and that's part of what's strange. He originally told Frau Arndt that he would remain only a couple of nights. Instead, three nights have passed, and still he shows no signs of leaving. Frau Arndt told me that he has been hinting that he might stay several days longer."

"Perhaps he is not feeling well." This was a logical deduction because no tourist had ever stayed in Boidburg longer than two days. You can only look at a forest from one direction for so long. "Or perhaps he is waiting to meet somebody."

"On the contrary, his reason for staying appears much less innocent than either of those explanations. Frau Arndt told me that he gave every indication of preparing to leave on the morning of his second day—until he caught a glimpse of Herr Lobwasser and Dr. Palmer. When he did, she said, he appeared to have recognized them, yet he did not approach them. Thereafter he showed no desire whatsoever to depart."

"Really?" I thought over the situation quickly. "I will have a talk with Herr Sigerson."

Herr Fritz Lobwasser and his beautiful wife Elise had arrived in the community a year after myself. Herr Lobwasser, a tall, extraordinarily thin man of about forty years with bright gray eyes and a

confident manner, had purchased a farm two kilometers east of the village. It was a well-tended place, and the Lobwassers had kept it up by hiring a manager, while doing no work themselves. They did not join in the life of the community, and because Herr Lobwasser was a secretive man, I often perpended whether he might be some sort of fugitive, anarchist, or revolutionary. Equally reclusive was Dr. Oswald Palmer, a morose Englishman of great girth, short stature, and thick beard. He had arrived with the Lobwassers, allegedly to attend upon Frau Lobwasser, who was said to be in delicate health.

I had learnt that the household was not as it appeared, however. According to their housekeeper, Frau Schmidt, Palmer never appeared to attend Frau Lobwasser, who for her part seemed to be in good health although poor spirits. Frau Schmidt said that the Lobwassers were apparently people of wealth, but there was no indication of where the money came from. Certainly it did not seem to have been the result of any industry on Herr Lobwasser's part, for he spent as much time studying scientific texts and experimenting with various model contraptions as Frau Lobwasser spent reading poetry. As for Dr. Palmer, he engaged in no particular activity whatever and instead spent his hours walking about the farm with his hands clasped behind his back or watching Herr Lobwasser experiment with the models. I had asked my wife—through whose agency these discoveries of Frau Schmidt were communicated to me—what sort of models Lobwasser possessed, but perhaps because Frau Schmidt was a poor peasant woman who had lived all her life in the purlieus of Boidburg, all she could say was that they looked like machines of some sort.

When I entered the inn and asked Frau Arndt to summon Herr Sigerson, she informed me that the stranger had left on foot several minutes earlier.

"Ah, then he has finally departed," I said.

"Not at all. He said that he was going for a walk and would return before nightfall."

"Really. Well, I will have to postpone my interview with him." I started to leave but remembered Sigerson's interest in the Lobwassers. "Tell me, Frau Arndt, which way did Herr Sigerson walk?"

"East, sir."

Towards the Lobwasser farm.

This caused me concern but not alarm. I had no proof that Sigerson was a criminal, although I had my suspicions. What I deter-



mined to do was to keep the closest watch on him. This would not be difficult considering the small size of Boidburg and my lack of other activity.

I asked Frau Arndt to inform me of any future strolls by Herr Sigerson.

Only a short time passed before this request bore fruit.

An hour after sundown Frau Arndt's little nephew knocked at our door to deliver a note from his aunt: "Herr S. has left and walked east out of town again." Over Helga's confused protests, I immediately left the house and set off in pursuit. I took my revolver, for I realized that I might be dealing with a hardened fugitive, anarchist, or revolutionary, and it was my taking the gun from the sock drawer where it normally reposed that alarmed Helga.

I didn't know where Sigerson was, but I suspected that he was heading for the Lobwasser farm. Therefore, without trying to discover his trail, which in any case would have been impossible in the dark, I started off at a rapid walk for the farm.

Even in the dark I made rapid progress because of my familiarity with the road. I arrived just in time to see the silhouette of a man climbing the rail fence that bordered the farm. From his tall and thin appearance I assumed that he was Herr Sigerson. Needless to say, I hurried after him. By the time I reached the fence, he was already halfway to the farmhouse.

I had only cleared the fence when suddenly Sigerson turned around. I had no doubt that he saw me. I drew out my revolver and aimed at him. "Halt, sir, or I shall fire!" He didn't move.

Slowly, with the gun level in my right hand, I walked across the field toward him. In the Lobwasser house behind him nothing stirred, and no shadows of curious occupants appeared at the lucent windows. For his part Sigerson stood motionless, his hands at his sides, his chin and huge nose held high in a dignified manner, as though he'd not been caught in the act of trespassing.

When I came up to him, I demanded, "What are you doing on this private land, Herr Sigerson?"

"I was walking upon it, constable. What did it appear that I was doing?"

"And were you doing this walking with the permission of Herr Lobwasser?"

"Actually, no."

"Then you are trespassing, sir, and I suspect you were preparing to burglarize the Lobwassers' house."

Even in the dark I could see the look of contempt that clouded Sigerson's face. "Burglarize a house while three people are inside it? You credit me with powers of stealth that I do not possess, sir."

"Then why are you here?"

He didn't answer.

"Perhaps," I said, "we should go and ask Herr Lobwasser whether he knows you."

"We have never met."

"Then why are you here?" I pressed.

For another moment Sigerson said nothing, but finally: "I have reason to believe that Fritz Lobwasser is a coiner and probably a murderer as well. I cannot prove it—not yet. I was hoping to obtain the proof tonight. If he is the man I believe him to be and he is still up to his old tricks, there is possibly a machine somewhere on the farm that he uses to form the amalgam which is now used in place of silver in England."

"England!"

"Yes, England. Men fitting the descriptions of Herr Lobwasser and Dr. Palmer are wanted there for questioning in the disappearance of Mr. Jeremiah Hayling three years ago and the attempted murder of Mr. Victor Hatherley two years ago. The wanted men are certainly guilty of manufacturing fraudulent half crowns at a house in Eyford, which is a village in Berkshire near the borders of Oxfordshire."

Berkshire? Oxfordshire? None of these names meant anything to me. Nor was I persuaded by Sigerson's story despite its wealth of detail. I decided that the only course of action I could take was to arrest him, lodge him in our little village jail, and call upon Herr Lobwasser for any information about Sigerson that he could provide.

"I am going to have to place you under arrest," I told him.

"I am sorry," he said, "but I cannot allow you to do that."

"You what!"

"Constable, I cannot afford to be confined but must be at liberty to go wherever and whenever I wish. Members of a powerful criminal organization are seeking to murder me."

So that was it: a crazy man.

"And I am sorry," I told him, "but you leave me no alternative but to take you into custody."

"Everything I have told you is true. The case of the coiners was reported in the press two years ago. It received extensive play in London, and I strongly suspect that the German newspapers also car-

ried it. If you would consult their files for the peculiar case of the engineer's thumb, I think that—"

I sighed, and grabbed hold of the madman.

"I warn you, sir," he protested, "I am proficient in the Japanese martial art of baritsu."

"Herr Sigerson, I'm placing you under arrest in the Grand Duke's name on the charge of trespassing. Come with me."

He made a sudden move, and I am unable to report what happened next, for I have no ability to recollect the event.

The bearded face of Dr. Palmer was staring down at me when I awoke. My eyes blinked against the morning light, and my head protested painfully whatever that lunatic Sigerson had done to it. Within moments, it seemed, Herr Lobwasser was also there, inquiring as to my reason for sleeping in his field.

I stumbled to my feet assisted by Dr. Palmer and, while caressing my head with my hands, tried to answer Herr Lobwasser's questions.

"A certain Herr Sigerson has been staying at the inn," I said. "Because he had shown a strange interest in you, I decided to watch him closely. Last night he came out here. I followed. When I confronted him for trespassing, he attacked me after he made serious charges against you."

"Against me?" gasped Lobwasser. "What charges?"

I told him everything Sigerson had said.

"But that's ridiculous!" said Lobwasser. "The man has either mistaken me for someone else or is a madman."

"I suspect the latter, sir. If he is still in the village when I return, be assured that he shall not bother you or anyone else for a long time."

But Sigerson was not in the village. According to Frau Arndt, he had returned early last night, paid his rent, and walked off into the darkness. She believed that he had headed north. I borrowed a buggy and went up the north road in pursuit but never found him.

Which might have been the end of the matter if the Lobwassers and Dr. Palmer had not vanished within the week. There was no actual evidence of foul play. It appeared that they had left of their own volition, but suddenly.

They had, in fact, left behind many items of some small value. I entered the house as soon as their absence was reported to me, being already fearful that they might have been murdered, and I saw those items myself. Among them was a nearly empty bag of coins

that, upon examination by one more expert in such matters than myself, were found to be counterfeit English half crowns.

Which brings me up to the present. Last week I read a translation of the new book published this year in London, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. Imagine my surprise when I read "The Adventure of the Engineer's Thumb." Yes, part of Sigerson's tale was true, and the coiners sought by Holmes were the same who fled here last year.

What a clever fellow this Fritz Lobwasser is! I freely admit that he had me fooled. And even Sherlock Holmes merely discovered what he was up to after he'd done it, Lobwasser escaping before being foiled by any deductions of the great detective.

Do not imagine from this statement, however, that I wish in any way to belittle the late Sherlock Holmes. Far from it. He was one of my heroes, and I have employed his methods in my own police work (although I admit freely that they have not helped me recover the bicycle or avenge the pig).

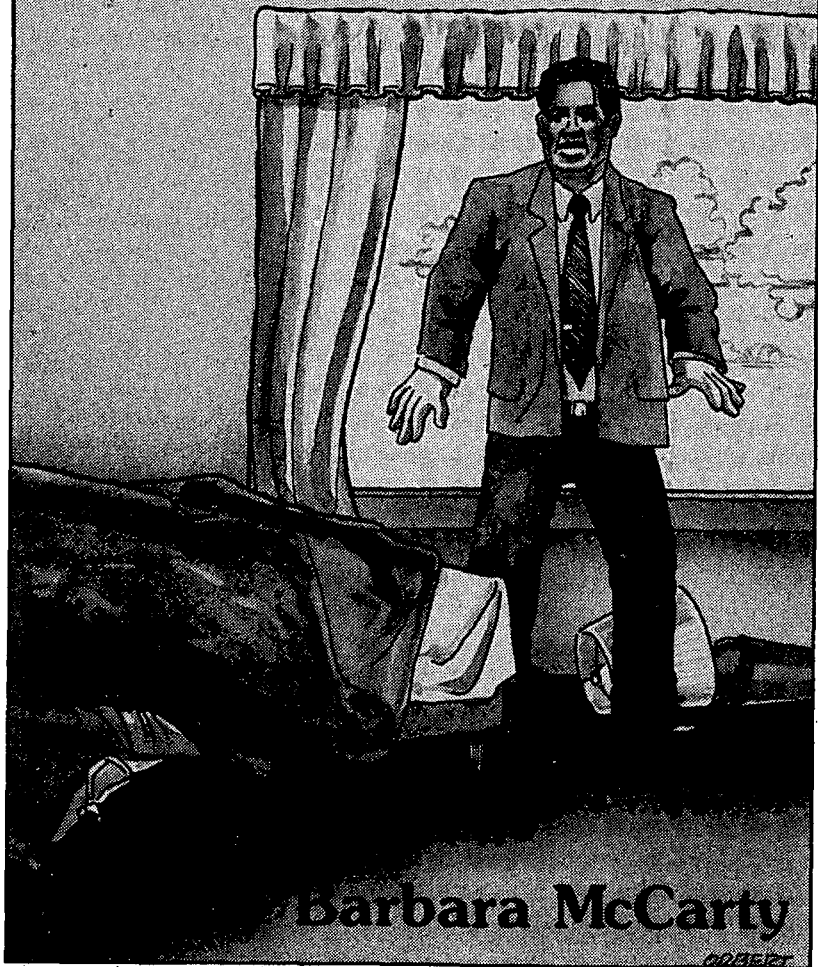
Indeed, by employing the Holmes methods I can fairly well deduce what happened last year. Obviously the Lobwassers and Palmer fled because they feared Sigerson. So who was Sigerson? I am certain he was a fourth conspirator, probably the fellow who sold the half crowns after Lobwasser and Palmer coined them. I suspect that Lobwasser doublecrossed Sigerson. I further suspect, from their physical similarity, that in fact Lobwasser and Sigerson were brothers. And since nothing more has been heard of the Lobwassers and Palmer, I also suspect that Sigerson did catch up with them despite their efforts to flee. From my own encounter with Sigerson, I am certain he could handle them. My guess is that their bodies repose in some isolated and dark section of the Black Forest.

My great regret is that Sherlock Holmes fell to his death at the Reichenbach Falls on 4 May 1891, as recounted in the last chapter of the book, only a short time before the above-described events occurred. I think Herr Holmes would have been interested to learn that the coiners fled to Baden after their encounter with him, and I also flatter myself to think that he would have been impressed by the manner in which I have tied all the loose ends together to solve the mystery.

*Grateful acknowledgment to Dame Jean Conan Doyle for permission to use the Sherlock Holmes characters created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.*

FICTION

# The Best Qualifications



Barbara McCarty

**T** Tyler Freeman was on the 405 sitting in rush hour traffic in an old Volvo with bad paint, major dings, over a hundred fifty thousand honest miles, and no air when the call came in. It wasn't the best. The man on the other end was Michael Valerian, the kind of guy to whom you want to say, "I'm sorry Mr. Valerian, I'm seriously backed up at the moment, but let me refer you," and then you just lose the call with some trumped up cell-phone problem, and you don't answer your next eight or ten incoming.

You would definitely do that if you were not Tyler Freeman and earnestly married to a good woman he loves but who has given him four daughters. Every one is the apple of Tyler's eye, and every one is in college. And not just college-college. His oldest is in law school, the next down is in med school, and the twins are in an East Coast ivy, where, when it's all said and done, their combined tuition and room and board will have cost him twice what his house did.

This puts a man in a position where all the bucks he stashed away during five seasons with the Rams, and most of what he had squirreled away out of the salary he pays himself as boss of his own agency, Tyler Freeman Associates, has disappeared into the mortgage and the car pay-

ments and the colleges and all the other stuff a man has to supply so five great women will have what they need to get by in this world.

So what Tyler said as he inched the Volvo a few more feet down the freeway was, "What can I do for you, Mr. Valerian?" Of course whatever it was, it would be right on the edge, halfway right and halfway wrong, because that's the only way Valerian does business. To work a deal with him, what you have to do is keep yourself right. That and stay ready to get out fast if you need to. Not easy, but when you could pull it off, the money was always very, very good, which is the only reason Tyler was still on the phone.

"I need you to pick something up for me," Valerian said, but not in his usual important-guy voice. Tyler sat up a little straighter, slipped the Volvo into a space that had just opened up in the right lane, and told himself to get ready.

"And what might that be?" he said.

"You'll know it when you see it," Valerian said, still in the voice Tyler couldn't quite place.

"And where is this object?" Tyler said.

"Beverly Hills," said Valerian, "1376 Minton, just off Beverwil Drive, and you've gotta be there now."



"Well," Tyler said, running the number and the street through his head, planning out a route even while he was looking for the connection, "now is gonna be forty minutes at least, given where I am at this particular moment, Mr. Valerian." He pointed the Volvo's nose toward the off ramp. "So maybe you better get somebody else."

"You're it," said Valerian. "You got the best qualifications for the job. Just don't waste any time."

"So where do I deliver this object once I get it?" Tyler said.

"Take it . . . ah . . . I want you to take it to a lawyer's office in Santa Monica. The address is 36 Redmond. It's a block off San Vicente just before you hit Twenty-sixth Street, number's on the building. Park in the back. I'll be watching for you. You know where I mean?"

As Valerian was talking, Tyler finally recognized the new voice the man was using. I'll be damned, Tyler said to himself. He's scared. And this put Tyler on pause for a moment while he thought about how big and bad a thing would have to be to chill Michael Valerian, but he let it ride. And he said, "I know where you mean. I'll be there when I'll be there." And Valerian hung up his end.

So Tyler called his office and talked to Sally, who answers his phones, reads his mail, and does

his bookkeeping, to let her know where he was going and who was paying for the trip. When Sally heard Valerian's name, she said, "Uh-oh," and then she didn't say anything more, like she was waiting for the rest of it, a disclaimer or something. But Tyler just said, "I'll be going on home after this, so you guys can lock up and I'll see you on Monday," and then he punched off because he didn't want to talk about it, and he didn't want to hear anything sensibly contradictory from her. Sally and two other guys are the associates in Tyler's business, which is listed in the yellow pages under "Private Investigators," cross-referenced "Detective Agencies." The four of them are together now fifteen years, nice and comfortable, everybody making a living, insurance covered, retirement planned for, licenses up to date, office space paid through the quarter, computer up and running, everything sailing smooth. So far.

When he got the Volvo off the freeway onto the surface street, Tyler was thinking that as good as his life was—total picture, family and work—it was too damn bad that a respectable thing like educating his kids would force him to do business with a scum like Michael Valerian, but then he told himself spilt milk is spilt milk, which there's



no point crying over since a man's gotta do . . .

At Beverwil and Olympic he called his wife. "It's me."

"Hi, hon, where are you?" she said.

"I'm still working, looks like a couple of hours more. Don't wait dinner."

"Oh, Ty, we're having your favorite tonight," she said, and he can hear the laugh in her voice. "You sure you can't get away?"

"Which favorite?" he said, smiling into the phone. "Domino's or All You Can Eat Chinese?"

"Kentucky Fried," she said, and now she was laughing out loud. "Try not to be too late, baby. And you be careful."

He told her he's always careful and he loves her, which is true, both counts, and punched off. He was thinking about his wife while he was driving the car and looking in the Thomas Guide for 1376 Minton. Not a cook, his wife, and now the girls are out of the house and she's working, he's getting a fast-food paunch, which he sucked in and then relaxed with a sigh. He was also thinking that Minton was going to be very upscale, a cul-de-sac with 1376 probably at the end in the middle of the curve, probably with a view.

When he crossed Wilshire, he was reflecting on the fact that this job wasn't going to be much

of a covert action. If they happened to be out and about, the neighbors would sure enough take note of the Volvo; unless the maids and nannies and gardeners parked on the street, there wouldn't be anything like it visible in the 'hood. And they'd probably take note of him even quicker than they would his car. He had to smile at that picture—neighbors catching sight of a great big black guy walking with the hint of a football knee, start of a fast-food belly making him look even bigger, great big ol' hands that could "sho nuf lif' dat bale," not to mention grab dat handbag—nothing like him in the 'hood either.

On the other hand, Valerian knew all that. Might even be those "qualifications" he was talking about, you never know.

Minton turned out to be even more upscale than he had imagined. Five houses on the cul-de-sac, all snuggled down behind their fences and hedges, everybody armed-alarmed (or so they claimed on their little metal signs), and not much observable from the road except for a roofline here and there. Nothing was parked on the street.

The gate to the driveway at 1376 was open, but he stopped and considered before he decided to motor the old Volvo inside. A car was parked in front of the

entrance to the house; Porsche Nine Eleven Turbo was one way to describe it, five quarters of med school was another. The house—big, California Spanish, late sixties—sprawled at the midpoint of the drive that passed the front entry and then curled back around a medium-sized fig tree planted at the base with variegated English ivy that had leaves the size of I-Hop flapjacks. The other landscaping was heavy, lots of yew and oleander and ilex with smaller planting in front, mostly green but all combed and pressed, nothing how it shouldn't be. Except for the front door, which was standing wide open.

Tyler put the Volvo in behind the Porsche, turned the key, and gave some thoughts to his next move, which included a moment's reflection on the wisdom of getting his firearm (same vintage as the Volvo but nowhere near as used) out of the trunk. Dealing with friends of Michael Valerian could easily involve you with people who regularly carried firearms. And they'd be a whole lot more handy with them than Tyler was, since in his case a gun is basically a psychological prop, not a functional tool. He decided to leave the gun where it was. The question remaining was whether he should go on with this program or call Valerian and tell him to send

somebody else. It was in the name of multiple tuitions that he got out of his car and headed for the open front door.

There was a bell, which he rang several times with negative results. There was also a heavy brass door knocker, which he thumped heartily and which also brought no one. So he stepped into the foyer, where he was confronted with large Spanish furniture and enough cut flowers to cover a goodsized wedding, and called out gently, "Anyone home?" There was no response, so he moved a little farther in and tried again, but this time in a no-nonsense, pro football holler that could be heard over the roar of a footstomping stadium, "Hey! Hey! Anyone home?"

If anyone was, they didn't say so.

But he was in now and not likely to turn back; once Tyler commits to something he's usually there for the haul.

Beyond the foyer he found a living room the size of a basketball court, open-beamed ceiling high enough bats could be hanging up there and who'd know, lamplit at six forty-five P.M. (possibly on a timer) and filled jam-up with big sofas and more Spanish furniture and, at the end opposite the foyer entrance, an ebony-black grand piano. While he was still calling "Any-

body home?" he was strolling through the furniture toward the piano, which he had noticed had a couple of dozen framed photographs lined up two deep along its closed lid.

His photo inspection turned up only one recurring face, a white guy, mostly with a tan, about mid-thirties, very smooth and cool looking but probably not born anywhere near as rich as he seemed to be now if this was his house. In other words, pretty much the kind of guy you'd expect from Michael Valerian. Pretty much like Valerian himself, in fact, but thirty-some years younger. The other people in the pictures were no one Tyler could put names to—just people, some older, some younger, all looking degrees of rich.

Off the living room to his right he found a study with a desk that looked like a big boomerang covered in electronics. Impossible to say with a quick glance—not shuffling papers or checking into the computer—what the business was that drove the hardware, so he thought if he didn't find what he was supposed to someplace else, he might come back and give this a slower look. Behind the study was a dining room built to feed twenty with spaces in between, and behind that was a kitchen that would do a small hotel.

So far in his tour he had found nothing to take back to Valerian and no sign pointing directions.

Passing back through the living room, checking the outside this time, he saw a pool made to look like it grew there and the view he had been expecting. He was thinking that the view alone would have paid the twins' tuition, maybe with some left over.

There was a wet bar on this side of the living room, everything in its place except two glasses, one with a lipstick edge, the remains of some ice, and about an inch of . . . Dubonnet, he decided on the second sniff. The other had held scotch. Neat. No sign of any controlled substance. No smell of it, either. Not even tobacco.

The first three bedrooms, three baths, didn't have much to say. One of them had been turned into an exercise room, all glass on one side, state-of-the-art equipment lounging along the other three walls.

The hall running along the bedroom wing had a lot of what looked like expensive art but some of it not hanging all neat and square, the only thing except for the open front door that wasn't just pretty much like it should be.

The picture Tyler was getting was of the guy in the piano pho-

tos living there basically alone because so far he had found no sign of anyone else. But he wouldn't know for sure until he checked out the master bedroom.

Going through the house he had sung out the occasional "Hello!" or "Anybody home?" Now, at the open door to the master, he let loose a fifty yard yell, "Hey! anybody home?," in case they were so busy in there they hadn't heard him before. But no one answered, so Tyler walked on in.

First glance showed him the room had had a pretty good rough and tumble. Lamps knocked over, table on its side, little stuff, probably off the table, scattered across the floor, great big bed pretty messed up. Second glance disclosed what looked like blood, a lot of it, at the foot of the bed, which was crosswise in the room, its head against the south wall, so you could lie in it and look out the window at the view.

If you happened to be alive, you could do that.

Tyler walked carefully along the end of the bed, so as not to step in what looked like blood, following a trail of it, wondering if he was going to find him, her, them, or nobody.

Him.

Guy in the photo but not looking near as good. No carotid

pulse. No breathing. He straightened up and looked at the room again, thinking about it. Some kind of fight happened, then the guy was shot . . . probably somewhere near the end of the bed . . . where he fell and he bled . . . and then he crawled around the end, probably trying for the phone, which he never got to because he died on the way.

Looking at the guy again, Tyler guessed one shot, not delivered by a professional. Pro would have finished him off, leave no chance he could try for the phone.

So.

Whoever shot him probably did it, then turned and ran. Question, did they drive away or were they still around, maybe hiding somewhere? If they were still around, Tyler thought they were more likely outside than in; he'd been through the house. And most amateurs wouldn't want to be hanging that close to the body of the guy they'd just shot. So probably outside . . .

He was walking out of the master bedroom now, moving carefully so as not to disturb anything, but like one of those eye-in-the-sky deals, he was looking as he walked and not missing much. And he found what he was looking for, just the corner of it sticking out from under a double-decker chest of drawers. Squatting down, he

looked very carefully at the little pistol, seeing everything he could without moving it, thinking it was just the right size to tuck into a woman's handbag, to keep underneath her wallet, next to her handkerchief.

Still squatting, Tyler looked back over his shoulder at the evidence of the fight again, thinking about the lipstick on the glass. Thinking about the pictures in the hall, some of them crooked. Thinking about one single shot. Working out a scenario.

Maybe they had a drink, and then she says, "I really should be running along," and she puts her handbag over her shoulder. And the guy says, "Before I take you home, wouldn't you like to see the rest of the house?" And she says, "Well, all right." And they take the tour that ends up here. And then one thing leads to another, but it's one thing to him and another to her. Tyler straightened up slowly and looked at the rumped bed. So there's a fight, the photo guy thinks the advantage is all on him, but surprise! she's got the equalizer. So when the photo guy decides to try to re-tip the scale . . . Tyler made a pistol of his hand, aimed, waited a few seconds, and pulled the trigger.

He left the bedroom, walked back down the hall, this time looking more carefully at the

crooked pictures. If she hit them with her shoulder going out, she'd probably be about five four, five five, he figured. And she'd be goodlooking because the photo guy wouldn't waste his energy on anything less.

Outside again he looked into the Porsche. As he expected, no key in the ignition. He walked back to the house and sat down on the first step of the portico to take some load off the knee while he planned the rest of it out in his mind before putting the call in to the cops. "Yeah," he said to the cop who answered, "this is Tyler Freeman, California license 52 J 2870, expiration 9-14-98. I'm at 1376 Minton, it's a right off Beverwil Drive if you're going toward Santa Monica Boulevard. I've got a body here. Male, Caucasian, mid-thirties, gunshot. I ascertained he's dead, but aside from that I haven't touched anything. I'll be waiting on the street."

He got up carefully to favor the knee, and turning to face the house he said, sort of in the general direction of the densest shrubbery, speaking carefully and about medium loud, "I'm the guy Michael Valerian sent. He probably described me, so you know I'm telling you the truth. You better get in the front seat of my car. The cops are on their way, so don't waste any time. If they should happen

to ask you anything, which they probably won't, let me do the talking."

At this point about the only questions he had left were, one, who was she—wife, daughter, or mistress, and, two, would Valerian pay him if he did what he knew he was going to do? But when she came walking out of the shrubs at the end of the house, he saw that while he had come very close, he hadn't gotten it exactly right.

Tyler didn't lie to the cops. What he told them was he had accepted a commission from a client, Michael Valerian, to pick something up at this address. When he got here the door was open, he walked in, found the dead guy, and called the cops. And no, Valerian hadn't told him what it was he was supposed to pick up. Fortunately one of the uniforms remembered his stint with the Rams, and after they had all kicked that around for a while he was established with them as legitimate, regardless of the Valerian connection. When the detectives showed up a few minutes later, he told his story again, this time adding that he thought his "friend"—glancing toward the Volvo—could be named Lisa. They took his statement, but they were more interested in investigating the scene (the dead guy turned out to be a whole lot

further along on the wrong side than Valerian ever got to even on his bad days) than they were in Tyler and his friend in the car. If they needed him, they'd be in touch. So everything was cool, and about five minutes later he was heading the Volvo down Beverwil toward Olympic.

All the way to Santa Monica she just sat there. He put her at eighteen, maybe nineteen, about the age of his twins, and he saw she was better looking than she had to be. She was also fairly well numbed out—he had to ask her three times to fasten her seatbelt. She didn't seem to want to talk—maybe she couldn't talk—either way was good because he surely didn't want to hear anything.

He waited until he was pulling into the lot behind Valerian's lawyer's office to say what he had to say, clearing his throat to get her attention. "You know you gotta go to the police. You gotta tell them what happened. You gotta do it just as soon as you can."

No response.

"I mean right now," he said. "It's going to take the cops a while to track you here, but they'll do it. I'd say sometime tonight."

She jumped at that, almost like he had hit her, and then she jerked around in the seat to look at him, probably, he thought, ac-

tually seeing him for the very first time.

He brought it down some, keeping to the facts but sounding a little kinder. "It's not like you have any choice, honey. Your fingerprints are on the gun, and the gun is still right where you dropped it."

She was starting to cry, so he kept it soft but he didn't let up. "Don't try to get away with this. First, it won't work, and second, you turn yourself in, right away, and you get a very good chance they'll believe what you tell 'em."

She was really crying now but maybe still listening, so he went on, "What you got going is the guy you shot wasn't the pope, honey. He wasn't even one of the nice guys. And the cops know that. But if you make them find you . . . well, then they won't be so sympathetic, regardless the guy was a certified scum. Take my word."

In the corner of his eye Tyler saw Valerian come out the door of the building and then start to run like he could give himself a heart attack, heading for the Volvo, three of his guys pounding along after.

"There's your grandfather coming," Tyler said. A guess, but right on because, sure enough, she turned around quick toward the door, trying to get out of the car but not doing it because her

seatbelt was still fastened—delicate white hands trying to release the buckle, having no luck. So Tyler reached across, and while he was unfastening the belt he had time to tell her, "You go right to the police, honey. Don't you let your granddaddy talk you out of it. He can send one of his hotshot lawyers with you, that's okay, but you tell the cops the truth. You do the right thing, and before you know, this will all be behind you, and life will be good again."

For a split second she looked at him like she was really hearing him, so Tyler added, "I promise you." But then she was out of the car, running across the lot toward Valerian, falling into his arms.

Valerian, looking over her shoulder after the first moment had passed, made eye contact with Tyler, who was standing beside the Volvo on the driver's side, looking back across the top of the car, seeing the granddaughter buried in the man's arms and Valerian's guys standing respectful in the background. And then they all turned around and started walking toward the office, Valerian helping her along.

He was on the 405 again, headed home again, but no traffic this time so the Volvo was humming right along. He was evaluating the afternoon, pros



and cons, and also thinking that after this one last night of KFC, he better do a couple of weeks of Wendy's salad bar. That and get up earlier, walk five miles instead of two, maybe even try to pick up the pace a little. And he was thinking about the granddaughter, guessing that after she popped the photo guy, she must have called her granddad all in tears and panic because she was stuck there, no way to get out. She didn't have a car . . . and the keys to the Porsche were in a dead man's pocket. And for reasons too complicated even to start to try to unravel—but undoubtedly orbiting through the various businesses this guy and Valerian had in common—Valerian couldn't go to her himself, and he couldn't send one of his gofers. The risk of any one of them being found in the vicinity of the dead guy would be too great. Valerian was also probably trying to keep his options open as long as he could, at least until he got it sorted out, which would explain why he didn't send one of his lawyers. So when she called, Valerian must have told her to stay put, he'd send somebody. And since he knew Tyler wouldn't make a mistake and pick up the gun (because he wouldn't pick up the gun, it's that simple), he made the phone call.

Tyler figured if he was right

about the granddaughter being what he had been sent to get, the money was going to be even better than he had thought. The problem was he couldn't take it unless the granddaughter turned herself in. Soon. Like tonight. Which he hoped she would, and more for her sake than his. And which is saying a lot considering that if she didn't he'd have to do the job himself. The extent of the resulting bad fallout if he did that he couldn't even start to imagine, but he knew any money he lost would be the least of it.

He was about to call his wife, tell her he was just making the turn onto Montedoro so she could put the Colonel in the microwave, when his phone rang. Could be his wife. Could be Valerian. He looked at his watch. Probably too soon for Valerian—lots to talk about, decisions to make, things to do. Probably Althea. So he answered the phone.

"I knew you had the qualifications, Freeman, a man with four daughters," Valerian said, like that explained everything, and Tyler heard that he sounded like his old, important-guy self again. "I've always been an excellent student of human nature," Valerian went on, "but every now and then even I make a mistake. It was convenient this wasn't one of those times."

"Yeah, well, congratulations," Tyler said, not knowing for sure yet how he was feeling. "What's your granddaughter going to do?"

"Just what you told her to," Valerian said, not missing a beat.

"Well, all right then!" Tyler said. But Valerian had already hung up.

And Tyler started thinking maybe he'd pass on the Ken-

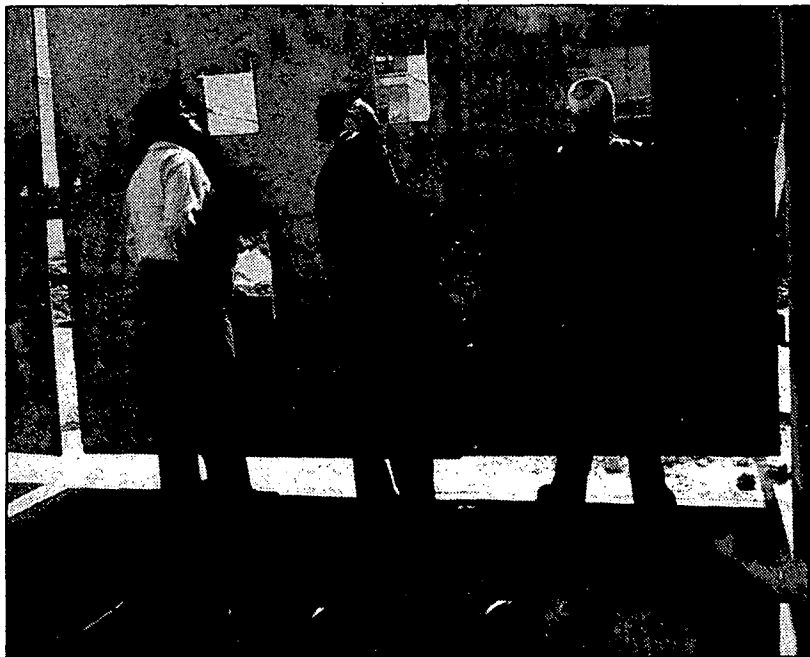
tucky Fried and take Althea out to dinner instead. He glanced at his watch. Not too late. He put in his home number thinking, it's Friday night. She's not working tomorrow. So they could make it a late night. Maybe catch a movie. Hey, maybe go to a club. Dance a little, spend some of Valerian's tuition money.

And now he's smiling into the phone, talking to his wife.

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# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



*Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.*

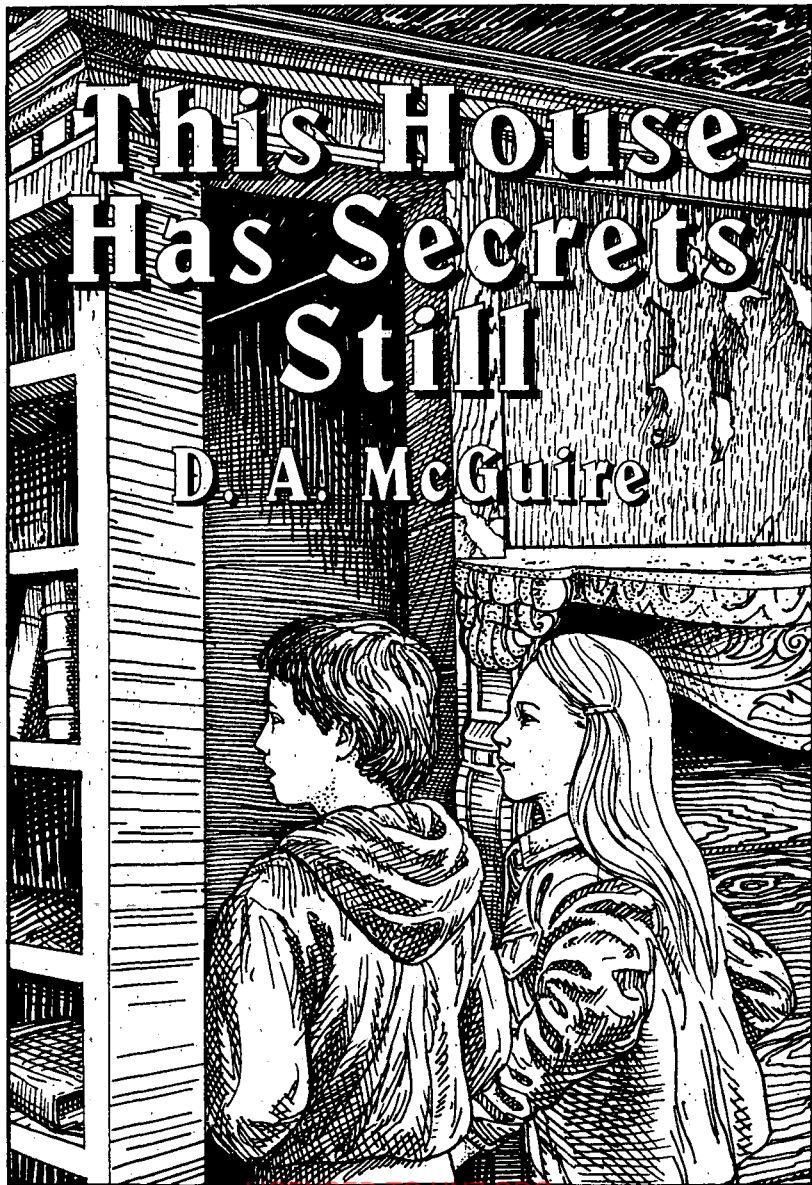
The game is up. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "October Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the April Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

# This House Has Secrets Still

D. A. McGuire



he lied.

Are all fourteen-year-old girls such awful liars? As they run away with a smile that dares you to try to stop them? And as they laugh back at you, knowing you won't stop them, you can't stop them, and for reasons you'll never entirely understand, you're theirs. In their power. Under their control.

"We can't go in," I'd told her not forty-five minutes ago. "I'll take you out there, but it's all boarded up and condemned, with No Trespassing signs everywhere. The next big storm will take it out to the sea. So all we can do is look, Meggie, from the road. There's no way we can go inside. I know what I'm talking about. The last time I was out there, I watched some guys take out the stained glass windows. Jake was there, and Mr. Hornton, and they both said the house is starting to slip on its foundation and it hasn't much time left. It's really dangerous—I'm not kidding—and we absolutely, positively cannot go inside."

"Of course not, Sawyer," had been her indignant reply as she flung back her long blonde hair, then wound a red elastic band around it. "I just want to see it, for crying out loud!" Then she had run off to get her bike, leaving me standing on the curb in front of the school . . . like she so often did.

And now here I was, standing in a light drizzle as she ran around to the rear of the house. I knew the first thing she'd see: the pounding surf racing up to the cliff's edge. The tide was on its way in, and the cliff was right there, not a dozen feet from the house. Then I heard her shout, "Wow! Look how close it is to the edge!" I was still out by the road holding my bike. She'd thrown hers down on the sparse brown grass of Mrs. Valentina's front lawn.

Funny how I still thought of it as Mrs. Valentina's front lawn—and Mrs. Valentina's house, despite the fact the eighty-one-year-old woman was all moved out and safely settled into what she called her "little bungalow," an early eighteenth century colonial she had bought a month ago. It was a very different house from this one, this magnificent and dignified saltbox dating from the early 1820's that stood perched on the edge of a bluff overlooking East Manamasset Bay. It had been hard for Louisa Valentina to leave the house; I'd seen the sadness on her face when I was here with Jake, my mother's friend, and Mr. Hornton, a retired sign-painter I've known for years. Along with a few of Mrs. Valentina's friends and relatives, we'd come out to help her move.

task. The rooms of the house were crammed—literally—with valuable antiques, furniture for the most part but there were also books, rugs, light fixtures, and even appliances that had to be moved. The antique black iron stove she had been particularly attached to, and before the men had disconnected it, Mr. Hornton asked Jake and me if we'd mind stepping outside for a few minutes.

But I was just a kid; I hadn't understood. I'd looked in through an opening where a stained-glass window had been removed, and I saw Mrs. Valentina standing in the middle of her dismantled kitchen with tears in her eyes.

Mr. Hornton walked over to me, said, "She's saying goodbye."

But now it was early November, a typical drizzly day on old Cape Cod, with rain washing in from the bay carrying behind it a wall of fog. It was altogether a very unpleasant, very damp sort of day, and I was starting to wonder why I had agreed to bring Meggie out here, why I'd given in to her curiosity. Because up until now she had seemed only mildly interested in the house; it hadn't been until seventh period class today, a study hall we shared, that she had passed me a note: "You are taking me out to the house on

the edge. Today. After school. Megs."

Well, the house had been of more than merely local interest. It had been in all the bigger newspapers, even the *Cape Cod Courier* and the *Boston Herald*. Our town's cable news station had done a lengthy story on it, too, which they'd then sold to CNN. They'd also made a deal to return and film the house when it took its final trip over the edge . . .

And down the bluff into the icy waters of Manamesset Bay.

So why today had Meggie Charleton suddenly taken an interest in what had been, in her own words, "Just some boring old house. Who cares about it?"

I shivered and turned to look both ways up and down the road. There was only one other resident out here on Quinicut Point, a lawyer who lived about a quarter of a mile down the road. But he knew me, and he might recognize my bike. I'd been out here a half dozen times to help Mrs. Valentina pack.

So I lugged first my bike, then Meggie's, over to a patch of low shrubs and shoved them down out of sight. That was just in case someone did drive by, Attorney Suddard or one of his friends. Then I walked up to the house.

All the windows had been nailed shut with pieces of plywood; the doors were firmly locked and boarded up. But in two places—the small kitchen window over Mrs. Valentina's black slate sink and the window of the tiny bathroom to the rear—there were great, gaping holes. Two weeks ago I had stood on the narrow back porch with the sea practically right under me and watched as Mr. Hornton and a carpenter friend had removed the "irreplaceable" stained-glass windows there.

"We can't go in, Meggie," I told her firmly. She was standing on the porch, too, staring at the hole where the kitchen window had been. "Look, didn't you see the Condemned sign nailed on the front door? And the No Trespassing and Police Take Notice signs? We can get in big trouble if anyone finds us out here."

"You are such a coward," she shot back at me, flipping her ponytail. "Where's your sense of adventure? Besides—" she was already climbing up onto the windowsill—"your mother is dating a police captain or something, isn't she? *You're* not going to get in any trouble."

"Meggie—"

But she was already gone, slipping head first through the window. Damn that girl! Because how did I explain to someone so headstrong that the fact

my mother was dating a police sergeant, Detective Jacob Valari of the local police department, only made things worse? If I were caught—well, wouldn't this be considered breaking and entering?

Or at least entering?

I really had no choice but to inch myself up and crawl through the hole after her.

I've seen plenty of tough-guy movies, and I know how some guys, even guys just fourteen years old, would have stopped Meggie. Physically. By grabbing her and pulling her out even if she kicked and screamed and cried. But the truth is Meggie was a good two inches taller—and at least fifteen pounds heavier—than me. (Not that she was fat or anything; in fact she was put together pretty nicely if the comments she got from the older guys at school were any clue.) So if I'd tried to stop her, she probably would have decked me.

I felt it was better to just go in with her, let her look around a bit, and then get her the heck out of there before anyone found out.

"Oh, Herbie, this is wonderful." She was standing in the middle of the empty kitchen. "Look at it. And so close to the water." She raced over to a window, hands on a stained countertop to look out at the sea. "Can you imagine what it must



be like to live and eat and sleep here?" She spun around to me. "So close to the ocean? And when there was a storm, it must have been absolutely wonderful!"

"It must have been pretty scary, you mean. Storms around here come in and go back out, again and again. A lot of houses this close to the water get hit by lightning on a regular basis."

"You are such a coward," she accused. "Oh, I know. *You've* been out here before, such a showoff!"

"I asked you a couple of times to come with me. And I'm not a coward, and—"

She started to hurry past me toward the dining area, but I grabbed her arm and she spun around, startled, staring at me.

"Why today, Meggie? Why did you want to come out here so badly *today*?"

And even as her clever face molded into a grin, I understood, remembering something one of her friends had said to her right at the end of study hall. I wanted to kick myself. My mother had been so right! Just three nights ago, while she washed dishes and I dried, I had asked her, "You've got to tell me this, Mom, are all girls so deceitful?"

"Why, Herbie, that's a rather strong word to use." My mother had paused in scrubbing a pan and smiled at me, the kind of

smile that went with a pat on the head or cheek when her hands were dry.

"Damn it, Mom, Meggie lies to me all the time," I told her, trying not to sound pathetic. "To get what she wants, and I fall for it every time."

"Oh, Herbie," she smiled gently, lines that I'd never noticed before appearing at the corners of her eyes. "Meggie is a simply delightful girl. I find it hard to believe she'd lie to you."

"Look, we were in science, right? Dissecting our first animal, a skinny little worm. It didn't bother me to cut it open and pin it back and . . ." I saw my mother's mouth turn down, so I skipped over the revolting parts, "Anyhow, Meggie, she asked me to do hers, said she'd wait for me at lunch, that we'd eat together, okay? So I did her worm, no problem, and when I got to lunch, she was sitting at a table with all girls. She knew I *couldn't* sit there, for crying out loud! So she just smiles and laughs at me when I go to eat with the guys. I could feel her eyes on me all lunch period, and when I went to get rid of my tray, she was still giggling at me—her and all her friends."

"And after lunch?" Mom asked, with the same sly look in her eyes that Meggie had.

I shrugged. "I walked her to English."

"And all her friends saw that, too, right?"

"Hey, Mom, she's got me . . ." I was flustered, threw up my hands, glass in one hand, damp rag in the other. "I don't know where I stand with her. I don't know if we're going together or she's using me, or what the hell . . . the heck is going on!"

"That's a teenage girl for you," was her only comment as she dried her hands to answer the phone.

Jake. It was Jake Valari, the cop she'd been dating for two years now. Not that I didn't like Jake—I liked him real well—but it was lousy timing on his part. Before long Mom'd be laughing and giggling on the phone—my thirty-eight-year-old widowed mother, like she was a schoolgirl . . .

Fourteen years old, laughing at me in a dark, damp house with her pale blue eyes:

"I told them I could get you to do it. See if Heidi Mather or Sally Jenkins dares me to do anything again!" she laughed triumphantly.

"Okay," I said, not just a little bit crestfallen. I'd actually begun to think she'd wanted to come way out here just to be alone with me. Should have known better. "So you won the dare. Come on, we've really got to go, Meggie, before anyone—"

But she was off, dashing

through the dining room, then into the side parlor where furniture had once been stacked nearly floor to ceiling, then across the front landing where a few feeble rays of sunlight were falling between breaks in the gray-clouded sky outside. It was getting late; sunset was around six; we really had to get going . . .

But she was like a whirlwind, laughing and spinning in circles in the middle of empty rooms, delighting in the sheer size of them. It was an empty house, and every sound she made was coming back at her from four walls and a ceiling. It was also a large house, and for both of us that was such a novelty, such a strange and unusual place to be that even I wasn't immune to the feeling.

Meggie lived with her mother, who was divorced, in a cramped, two bedroom condominium. My mother and I had a small house to call our own, but up until a year ago we had lived in rented rooms, rundown motels, tiny apartments, or whatever my mother could get on her salary as a chambermaid and waitress.

So I knew the feeling. It was like being in a mansion—a castle—and for just a few minutes it was all ours.

"So what are you going to tell them, Heidi and Sally, I mean," I asked as she stopped spinning and threw out a hand to the fire-

place mantel in the room. It was covered with dust, but there were dark spots where vases and small figurines had once stood.

"That we came out here to make out—what do you think?" she laughed, rushing past me and giving me a shove with her hand.

I followed, breathless suddenly. But I was anxious, too, and nervous about being caught, or seen by someone in a passing car.

Which was pretty unrealistic. Quinicut Point was one of the least inhabited areas of Cape Cod, a "truly unspoiled and picturesque part of the Cape," the travel brochures said. The people who write them ought to see Quinicut in the winter.

"Meggie?" For a moment I couldn't find her. My hand automatically went out to a light switch—the old fashioned button type—but nothing happened. The electricity was disconnected and most of the light fixtures carted away.

Then I heard the thump of footsteps as Meggie found the back stairs—they were located through a door which led in one direction to the pantry, in the other up to the second floor.

"Hey, Meggie, we really shouldn't—" I shouted up the stairs to her. Then I heard a door shut and the clank of a toi-

let seat cover. "Meggie!" I shouted, rushing up the stairs, "There's no water any more. It's been turned off." I stopped at the top of the stairs, then heard the unmistakable flush of a toilet.

So I was wrong about the water.

The bathroom door flew open, and she laughed outright at me: "You think you're so smart, Mr. Straight-A's, oh-how-I-love-school, Herbert Sawyer, Junior! But if you're so smart, how come I got you out here? Answer me that!"

"Look, we've really *got* to go." Once more I put my hand out to take her arm, but she laughed, her blue eyes shining and defiant, and batted me away. Then she was off, running and laughing, down the narrow hall before us.

Overheard earlier today at the end of the seventh period study hall: "... never get him to take you ..."

I was a guy after all. I don't pay much attention to girl talk, I mean the stuff girls say and do when they're hanging around together. It really never amounts to much; it's all real catty. A girl will only be serious, or so I've discovered, when she's with you alone and not trying to make an impression on all her friends.

Guys aren't like that.

But here I was, the subject of that cat-talk, the object of her future ridicule, because God only knows what she'd tell her friends when she saw them again. I could have kicked myself again.

"Hey, look, I've had it. I'm going," I announced solemnly as I followed her down the hall past what was once Mrs. Valentina's bedroom, then past her father's, then another where she had stored chests and bureaus, and to the last room on the left, the one in which she had kept a large doll collection.

Mr. Hornton and Mrs. Valentina's nephew had helped her pack that up and move it out.

Now the room was empty except for one long floor-to-ceiling bookcase that held a few books on the bottom shelves. This bookcase had not gone with the rest of the furniture; it was built into the wall beside what had once been a fireplace. The fireplace was gone now, walled over when oil heat had been put in years ago. All that remained of it was a narrow, ornate mantel covered with dust and dead ants.

"Look, Herbie," Meggie was saying, pointing at the books. Then she was on her knees, pulling first one volume, then another from the shelf. "Did she forget these?"

"No." I paused, unable to speak for a moment—it was startling to see Meggie with a serious expression on her face. We were quiet a moment; the sound of the surf could be heard from right outside. It felt suddenly like the house was sitting on top of the surf and that we were rolling with it.

I shook that momentary sensation away, looked down at her, and realized she really was a lot prettier when she wasn't running around acting goofy.

"Then why are they here? Oh, Herbie, they stink!" She dropped one of the books, and held the other out at arm's length like it was a dead worm. Then she dropped that one, too.

"They're all moldy is why and have no particular value, according to Mrs. Valentina. So we just left them." I walked over to her and knelt down to retrieve the books, put them back on the shelf.

"I'm sorry," she said as I slipped a worn and dirty copy of *Gulliver's Travels* into the bookcase, beside it an ancient and decaying atlas. I felt her hand on my arm just as the atlas bumped against something, a lever, or something metallic that kept the book from going all the way in. I pulled the book back out as Meggie leaned close to me. "Did you hear me? I'm sorry if I tricked you. Did you think I

wanted to be somewhere . . . alone with you?"

"Here." I shoved the moldy book back into her hand, leaned down, and tried to feel what was in the way.

"Because I did, I really did—want to be alone with you, Herbie. This was just as good a way as any, so—"

"Be quiet," I told her. I had hold of something that was moving up and down in my hand, and when I gave a sudden pull—

The bookcase moved, turning on a wheeled dolly hidden in the boards under the floor. It turned as I continued to tug at it, moving a few inches, then a few more, until it swung wide, revealing behind it another room.

**I** am normally a very cautious person, even what one might call overcautious. I wish to make that perfectly clear. I am not at all impulsive.

But I am also only fourteen and was with a girl I liked rather a lot, a girl who had called me a coward just a few minutes ago. Besides, the room we were in was well lit, facing west as it was. There would be at least two more hours of sunlight—of a grim, gray kind—before . . .

"What do you think . . . ? Why . . . ?" Meggie was behind me as we stepped into the hidden room together. In fact, she was glued to my back.

I don't know what I expected to find. A hidden hoard of silver left there by one of Mrs. Valentina's ancestors?

Or what about a room full of contraband liquor left by the rumrunners of the twenties?

Or a cache of guns hidden by the racketeers of the twenties and thirties?

Or even a storehouse of antiques even more priceless than the ones we had taken away? Hidden here by Louisa's father, a secret even his daughter hadn't known about?

Or a body? Dangling from the ceiling—an ancient and corroding skeleton dressed in the linens and silks of another age?

Because we found none of these, just a large, dank, dark, and empty room. I felt Meggie breathing down my neck, and I turned. I was all the way inside the room; she was just behind me.

"It's empty?" she said. "Then, what . . . oh, Herbie! I know what it is! I know! It's—" and in her excitement she stepped all the way in, and off the dolly that turned the bookcase behind us—"a place to hide slaves! Do you remember? From Mr. Duncan's history class? Don't you remember his telling us—"

I dived forward, shoving her to one side as the heavy door-bookcase at her back swung

shut. She stumbled to the floor, moaning as she did, but I was too late. I pushed my hands against the back of the door wildly, searching for a way to push it open, and then, failing at that, fell to the floor and started to feel along the cold, damp wood for another lever, a switch, a cord, something I could push or pull, lift or turn . . .

But there was nothing there. Absolutely nothing. We were sealed in.

I have to give Meggie credit. She didn't panic—no screams, cries, no falling against the wall or me. Not that I expected her to act that way just because she was a girl, but for someone who freaked out trying to skin a worm, I wouldn't have thought her to be so . . . well, I guess the word is strong. She just calmly walked up to my side—it was pretty dark in there; there was just a thin sliver of light coming in from somewhere overhead, hardly a window, more likely some crack between the boards or where a window in the attic had been broken and then boarded up—and said, "Here, try this." She handed me something—a pen with a very small flashlight at its end. It was hanging off of one of those cheap key rings you can buy at convenience stores.

"Thanks." I took it and went

back to the wall, or what I now realized was the back of the bookcase, a very heavy, probably oak bookcase. Very slowly and carefully I ran the light back and forth over the back of it, searching for something, anything, an opening, a hole, a crack, a crevice. She did the same with her hands, starting with the bottom and working her way up slowly, and where the bookcase met at the corner walls.

Without saying so, we both knew there *had* to be a way to move the bookcase. It wouldn't have made any sense to make a closet or hiding place or whatever without a way out.

But it was also occurring to me—and as it did I felt my heart beating a little heavier, a little faster—that the mechanism that operated this sliding bookcase might be jammed or broken. There was also the very real possibility that this room hadn't been used or seen a human occupant since . . .

Well, if it were a "slave closet," and the Civil War was in 1865, and the Underground Railroad was in operation before that . . . then, since the 1850's?

"Let's try the other sides," she said so calmly it was eerie. She was almost like another person.

She had been on her knees, feeling around the bottom of the bookcase, finding nothing, and

when she stood up, turning suddenly, she stumbled into me.

"It's all right, Meggie," I told her. "There's got to be a way out of here."

"Of course there is," she snapped back. "Anyhow, it'll be dark soon, won't it? And your mother will be worrying, and she'll send that cop out to look for you, won't she? And sooner or later he'll see our bikes out by the road and figure we're in here. Then all we have to do is yell and scream when we hear him come up the stairs and—"

I had to cut her off, even though it seemed kind of cruel. "Meggie, I hid the bikes."

"—we'll get in trouble for coming inside and get lectured, and maybe I'll be grounded again, and—" She stopped short, my words sinking in only slowly. "You did *what*?"

"I hid . . ." I sighed as she stepped up close to me; I thought for a moment she was going to hit me. I couldn't see her face, just the rough outline of her cheeks, the brush of her hair against her shoulders. In any other place and in any other situation this might have turned out another way. Instead she seemed to shake as she turned away from me.

This is it, I thought, bracing myself. Now will come the hysterics, the tears, the God-only-knows-what.

Instead she said, "Gee, I'm glad I used the bathroom when I did."

Mr. Hornton once told me you never really know about people. You never know how someone's going to react—yourself included—until you're put to the test. The biggest blowhard or the most outrageously brave kid in class is sometimes the one who runs to the back of the room when the teacher brings out the dissection trays.

And you never know if you're the guy who's going to run into the burning truck and drag the driver out—or just stand by and watch him burn to death—until it happens to you.

Like Meggie and me stuck in that room, that closet that was about ten by twelve feet, by rough reckoning. I might never have guessed that the two of us would be so cool, so calm as we slowly and methodically ran our hands over the walls, through cobwebs and bundles of dead spiders, and then across the rough floor searching for a handhold, a button, a loose board—anything, anything at all. Not once did either of us accuse the other of bringing this on, and not once did we succumb to panic. You might have thought this was a casual school project, that we were working



on something quite ordinary and routine.

"Did you try over here?" And, "No, that's just a rough spot in the floor."

Then, "What's this? Oh, just some leaves." She tossed them down, held her hands out to me, said, "What's on my hands, Herbie?"

"Spider webs." And I brushed them off for her.

And all the while the room was getting darker and darker; the surf was booming up against the cliff, slowly undercutting rock and sand until the day the entire thing would tumble down. Gulls cried from somewhere beyond followed by the wail of a distant foghorn. It was getting colder, too; this was November, after all. And because we were on the water, there was always the wind.

I didn't want to say this, it scared me just to think it, but I had the sinking sensation that things were going to get a lot worse before they got better.

"How much longer . . ." She didn't finish the question; it seemed pointless to speculate, just as futile to respond. We were sitting in the middle of the room now, back to back. I had offered her my jacket, she had refused. Though I knew in a little while I wouldn't take no for an answer.

I had the right to do *that*, didn't I? No matter how brave, how stoic, she insisted on being. We were both wearing jeans, but I had worn a sweatshirt over a flannel shirt; she just had a thin cotton shirt under an old corduroy jacket. Girls are like that, more inclined to be stupid about clothes, it being more important for them to be "fashionable" than warm.

"Oh, not long. They've missed us by now, that's for sure." I looked straight up, swearing I felt something stirring there. It was probably just the breeze coming in off the water, stirring the eaves of the old house, maybe rustling a loose shutter or shingles. It was, after all, a very old house. It couldn't possibly be the surf striking against the cliff itself, then reverberating up through the house's foundation. "They'll look out here. It's what, about six thirty, seven?" I turned a little, feeling her shoulders tense up against mine.

"Six forty-five," was her answer; she had a watch, was shining her light on it. "My mother and I have eaten by now. I'm hungry." Then she was silent, but I felt her shoulder move again and she sighed, or maybe she was trying not to cry.

"I'm sorry, Meggie," I finally said, turning around, putting my hand on her shoulder.

"Sorry!" She spun around to face me, and I felt her fist on my arm. "Sorry! What have *you* got to be sorry about! I dragged you out here, have you forgotten? You told me not to come in! And I didn't listen! We're here because of me!" And she hit me again.

"Hey!" I shouted, deciding that if she hit me again, I'd hit her back, girl or not.

"And then you're so awful, so terrible about it! You know, I think I really hate you!"

"What do you mean I'm terrible, what—"

"You're so *nice*!" She spat the word out like it was the worst obscenity. "Why don't you yell and scream at me! Why don't you say, 'Meggie, look what you've got us into! We shouldn't even be in this house, and now we're stuck in this horrible, dark, smelly, spider-infested place!' Why don't you hate me? Why don't you? I'd hate *you* if you'd done this to me!"

"It's as much my fault as it is—"

"No, it isn't!" she screamed, bunching up her fist to hit me again. "My mother's right! She said to watch out for guys like you! Like my dad! Nice guys—I hate all of you!"

"What's this got to do with—" Then I realized she was just scared. I put one hand on her arm, then the other, kind of

slowly so I could dart out of her way if she starting swinging again. She had a pretty good punch. "You've got to calm down, Meggie. You're just—" I almost said, scared, thought better of it, said, "—tense" instead. "We're both tense, but we will get out of here, I promise. We'll look around some more. Maybe we missed something really obvious. Maybe there's a switch higher up on the wall, maybe—"

That's when we both froze. There was a scratching sound coming from somewhere. Behind me.

I let her go and scrambled over to the wall. "Throw me the light."

She did, but we had been at this now for almost two hours, and the battery in the little pen was growing feeble. I shone it along the wall anyway, listening, hearing only my breath and hers, and then the unmistakable sound of scratching—and squeaking.

"Oh my God!" she screamed. "Rats! Not rats!"

"No, probably mice!" I shouted. "Mice . . . the squeaks are too . . . too small for rats."

"What do you mean too small for rats?" She was on her feet. "Those are rats—there are rats just beyond that wall. Rats!"

What was I going to say? That I agreed with her? Be-

cause it did sound like the squeaks, grunts, and gurgling sounds of an entire rat colony.

"I'll get rid of them," I told her, turning and kicking the wall. The squeaks stopped for just a second, then resumed, so I kicked again, and again and again . . .

Until I kicked a hole right through the wall.

I had to admit that kind of surprised me, seeing my foot disappear into the blackness of that wall. I pulled it back real quick—I wasn't anxious to have a rat take a bite out of me—then I knelt down and looked inside very carefully with the flashlight. Meggie, apparently having gotten over her brief hysterical period, was beside me.

"Where does it go, Herbie? Is it out? Is it a tunnel? A passageway? Should we . . ." I felt her eyes on my face.

"The wood is rotten here," I told her, feeling it, pushing at it. I couldn't break it with my hands, but if I sat on the floor, I could kick it apart. As I did, a shower of something fell down in big clumps on the top of my sneakers. I ran the light over it quickly: sawdust, and what looked like fat white grubs.

I remembered seeing the dead ants on the fireplace mantel in the room outside. Carpenter ants. They'd tunneled all

through this wall, weakening it enough so I could kick pieces of it in.

But where did the dampness come from?

I grabbed the flashlight, drew in a deep breath, and stuck my head through the hole. Above me I could make out a hole at the end of a long tunnel. A chimney. Suddenly I knew where I was.

"This is behind the fireplace, Meggie, or what remains of it. Did you notice in the room outside—there was no fireplace? Just a mantel? It's been boarded and paneled over, but the chimney is still here except for the bricks on this side." I looked around, pulling at the edges of the hole I'd made. Then I reached in and ran my hand along the wall, feeling where the bricks supporting the chimney began.

"Maybe they needed some of the bricks for something," I said. "A walk or whatever. People often did that, reused what they needed." I grabbed her hand, pulled her toward the hole. "Take a look."

Winning at the sight of the ant larvae, she did. "Then it's a dead end. The fireplace opening is gone, and we can't climb up the chimney, can we?"

"No, but if the ants were all through this wall—the wood is wet here, and that's what car-

penter ants like—then maybe they're somewhere else, too. I saw dead ants on the mantel in the other room." I sat back down, said, "Watch out," and, after she moved back, kicked away enough rotted wood to make a hole large enough for me to crawl through.

And that's where I found myself, in a small, snug space barely five by five with a chimney hole straight overhead. I remembered seeing two chimneys on this house. This was one of them, and I was standing right beneath it, bricks underfoot and bricks to the back and right side, for like I'd told Meggie there was only one place that had had the bricks removed, the side adjacent to the small closet we'd gotten ourselves locked into.

From the chimney overhead was a stray bit of light as the sun went down. There had been a chimney cover at one time. Now it was gone so rain and snow leaked down into the fireplace, making the wood on this side wet, an ideal place for carpenter ants to take up residence.

But there was more here than an empty fireplace. I splayed the little light over it as Meggie started through the narrow hole. "There's not a lot of room here," I told her as she pushed her head and shoulders through. "Plus, there's an old trunk in here." I shone the light on it for

her to see. Evidently it had been stuffed inside the fireplace before it had been closed up.

"It's a steamer trunk," she exclaimed, taking the light from my hand and sweeping it over the top of it. "Oh, I wonder what's in it?"

"Let's get out of here first, okay?" I said. "I'm going to try here." I showed her where the opening to the fireplace had been. It was paneled over, but I was hoping they'd used cheap wood back then, or at the very least that the ants had gotten to it, too. "Just get back."

She did, though I could see her frowning over the trunk. It just didn't make sense to put an old steamer trunk in a fireplace and then board it up. But I was too busy kicking at the wood to think about it.

As I did, I said a silent prayer; I really had no doubt that someone somehow would find us. It wasn't like the house was ready to keel over into the sea at any moment—though you never know. And it could take hours or even days to find us up here.

But I should have been thinking more clearly, reasoning things out in a more logical way. If I had, maybe I would have just sat tight and waited. Instead I kicked at that wood paneling until I felt it start to give, to crack and splinter, and then just as my foot went

through, breaking a little hole into the outside room . . .

Meggie gasped behind me just as an angry voice boomed from the hall beyond, "Herbie? Herbie, that you? Are you in here?"

"Meggie?" I turned to take her arm, but she was crouched behind me, tiny flashlight in hand. She had opened the trunk, completely disregarding me, and was holding something in her hand. It looked like a rag. The sounds of heavy footsteps came from beyond. "I think I hear Jake. It's going to be all right now."

But she was frozen, stooped over in the back of the old fireplace, open chest before her. When she turned to me, I could see her eyes. They were like a ghost's as the white light of a flashlight flashed through the hole in the paneling I had just made.

"Meggie, we're out."

"Herbie? Herbert Sawyer, are you in there?" Strange how Jake's voice could sound both angry and frightened at the same time. Strange, too, how I could ignore him, as well as the greatly relieved sensation I'd been starting to feel, as I crawled back to where Meggie was still crouched, her face white with fear.

"It's a baby, Herbie," Meggie said, pointing inside the trunk. "There's a dead baby in there."

"Is it breaking and entering, Jake?" I asked as he and Officer Andersen took care of Meggie—a badly shaken and frightened Meggie all of a sudden. I wondered how much of it was real, how much she was pretending fear and a sudden "dizziness" in her head to gain sympathy and deflect what we'd done from herself onto me.

"I mean, the property's condemned and everything. No one lives here any more."

He was ignoring me, giving orders to Fred Andersen to call our mothers, call the station, report that we'd been found, thanks to Meggie's chatty friend, Sally Jenkins. It was she who'd told Mrs. Charleton that yes, Herbie Sawyer had plans to "take Meggie out to the old house on the edge of Quinicut Point."

I knew girls weren't to be trusted.

"It really is," she said to me, to Jake, and then to Officer Andersen as he took her away. "It really is a baby in there. Oh, who would put a baby in a trunk?"

And then she was gone before I could say anything more, which left me and Jake standing in the cold, gray room. There was just a little bit of red sunset upon the western horizon, a brief bit of color in a gloomy, gray-shrouded afternoon.

For what seemed like minutes he stared at me like I was his worst enemy—and he my worst nightmare. There was no way Meggie could appreciate the fact that it was far worse for me that a cop was dating my mother—a hundred times worse because I had to be a hundred times better than any other kid in Manameset.

“Look, I’m not going to say anything because you’re not going to believe anything I’m going to say, are you?” I finally said.

“You got stuck in there, didn’t you?” he said, nodding at where he and Officer Andersen had broken away the rest of the paneling so Meggie and I could crawl out.

“Yeah, like this.” I went over to the bookcase, took out the bottom book, found the lever, and pulled it. Immediately the door moved enough to put one hand inside, pull it open. “In there.”

He came over and stood next to me, shifting his weight from foot to foot. Jake was a big guy, not a heavy guy but just a big all around man, with a temperament—to quote my friend, Mr. Hornton—that could be as mild as an old mule’s or just as cantankerous when he got riled up. Luckily for me, he was simply curious at that moment and fiddled with the door for a few minutes.

I almost wanted him to step inside, have the door shut on him, and watch him crawl through the rotted wood into the fireplace to get out.

I replaced that thought with this one: Jake was going fairly easy on me considering the stupid thing I’d done. Maybe he knew what was facing me back home.

“Okay, it was stupid to bring her here. I shouldn’t have been . . . showing off, telling her what it was like and stuff. When she asked if we could come inside, take a look around, I should have said no and taken her home. So I’m ready to take my punishment for whatever I’ve done. Trespassing? Endangering a minor?”

“You know your problem, Herbie,” he said, turning away from the opened bookcase. “You’re fourteen going on forty. You think I don’t know that she dragged you up here?” Then as an afterthought, “The mechanism in the floor is old, rusted—” He was kicking at something. “Got jammed when you shut the door.”

“No, no, you’ve got it all wrong,” I insisted. “I’m responsible. Just me. It was a stupid thing to do, so go on, say it, throw it at me. Let go. I can take it.”

“Her girlfriends, both of them, said she was bragging about

getting you up here, that she could get you to do anything she wanted."

"She said that?" I was just slightly taken aback.

"It's a place to hide slaves, isn't it?" he said, his interest turning back to the room Meggie and I had spent the better part of two hours stuck inside. Then he turned to look down at the fireplace opening. "And there's a skeleton in it, too. Not surprised." He looked at me and grimly smiled. "No, you're not off the hook, boy, but I think we've got a death here to investigate that suddenly takes precedence over my irritation at you. What do you think?"

"Yeah," I agreed, trying not to smile in return; I could only guess what he had in store for me later. "I guess we do."

**T**he following day Jake picked me up after school. It had been a funny kind of day. I'd taken all kinds of ribbing from my so-called friends. Comments like, "How far'd you get with Meggie Charleton?" And, "Nice one, Sawyer, wish I'd thought of it first," and even, "Hey, Herbe-meister, was she any good?" I ignored them all. Guys my age can be such jerks.

As for Meggie, she'd barely spoken to me. At lunch she'd whispered, "Call you tonight."

later she'd been missing from study hall. Her friends said she'd been summoned early by her mother.

As for my own mother, she was less than ecstatic that I had let myself be lured out to the house, got stuck in a possible slave closet, and then had to kick my way out. The fact that I'd also been with a girl—and that she'd found the body of a baby in a steamer trunk—didn't help.

But I think there were things my mother was slowly learning to accept about me. And this was one of them: that I had the uncanny bad luck to uncover things like this, on an occasional basis, that is. Anyhow, when Jake had called her after school, her attitude had been very . . . well, very conciliatory.

"Of course, Jake. But bring him home as soon as you're done, please? I just don't see how Herbie can—" Then a sigh, a pause, and a baleful look my way as I pretended to be absorbed in algebra at the kitchen table. "That old?" Her voice softened, then I heard a tiny edge of interest creep into it as she turned away from me—as if I couldn't hear her that way—and said, "My goodness, Jake, how are you ever going to find out who put it there?"

"We have another stop," Jake



told me as he backed his Firebird out of our driveway. "Mrs. Valentina. She wants to see where the body was found."

"You don't think *she* had anything to do with it, do you?" I asked, trying not to appear too eager. "Did she say she knew about that closet? Did you check to see if she ever had any children? Or if any kids were ever missing from the neighborhood? I mean, Jake, she's the nicest old lady I think I've ever met and—"

"Shut up," he said firmly. I did. Then as he lit a cigarette and started off down the main road toward the North Bay area, he said, "The body was removed this morning. Dr. Abernathy was called in. Remember her?"

"A forensic anthropologist, yeah," I said, recalling an earlier case involving Mrs. Valentina and her house. "She kind of liked you."

He just gave me a look that time; I shut up.

"The trunk was filled with clothing mostly, some blankets, curtains, and the skeleton of a baby. Dr. Abernathy's guessing, but she thinks the clothing dates from the 1860's."

"What?"

"Or thereabouts. She's calling in a textile expert from New Bedford to verify it." His sharp blue eyes darted from the road, to me, and back.

"So the baby's been there since then."

"Or was just stuck in a trunk with a lot of old stuff."

"Yeah." I was taking this all in. I hadn't gotten a look at the baby, didn't know if it had been clothed or how old it had been or what the skeleton looked like, or—

He answered some of it for me. "Can't tell the child's sex, but it was wrapped up in a blanket. Probably less than a month old. The head." He tapped his own skull. "The experts can tell from the skull bones. It also—" another pause and a grim look my way—"had numerous birth defects, so maybe it died of natural causes shortly after birth. Could be a hundred explanations, Herbie, and not all of them are criminal."

"It's not criminal to stick a little kid in a trunk? Even if it died of natural causes? It should have been buried, Jake! Everyone deserves—" I stopped, my mouth hanging open. Funny, I hadn't even realized I had such strong feelings on the subject.

"A girl, a woman, has a baby that dies shortly after birth." Jake shrugged. "Remember, we could be talking the 1860's, '70's—if it was born out of wedlock, or if the girl was—" I saw the uneasiness spread over his

large round face, "Anyhow, we'll do our best to figure it out, and to start we need to talk to Mrs. Valentina."

"What kind of birth defects, Jake?" I was trying to imagine what birth defects would show up in a baby less than a month old, or in its skeleton.

"Congenital talipes something." He gave a shrug. "The feet. Oh, and the mouth, cleft palate."

"Cleft palate?" I echoed. "And clubfoot."

"Feet." He gave me the third in a series of grim looks.

"Damn, Jake, maybe somebody just smothered the poor thing."

"I don't like thinking about it, Herbie."

Neither did I. We were silent the rest of the way to Mrs. Valentina's new house.

Mrs. Valentina greeted us in her usual effusive way, with tea and cookies and a warmth toward me that was surprising, seeing that I had gone into her old house without permission. Despite that, I sensed a kind of unease in her. Maybe Jake did, too, because as he helped her put on her coat he told her she was "Very good to accommodate us this way. Wish we didn't have to do it, but—"

She met his expression with a thin smile and nodded.

Then we were on our way to the house on the edge. I sat in the back seat of Jake's car, and even from there I could sense the anxiety in both of them. When we arrived at the house, there were a couple of parked cars in the yard: the county coroner's, a police cruiser, and the utility vehicle Dr. Abernathy drove. Attorney Suddard from down the road was also there, and he took Mrs. Valentina's arm to accompany her into the house. They walked ahead of Jake and me, and as I watched, the lawyer spoke quietly into her ear.

It made me uneasy. I was praying she had nothing to do with the baby Meggie had found.

But things aren't often the way they appear. I had assumed that the discovery of a baby's skeleton in an old trunk in the back of a boarded-up fireplace off a hidden room in her house was making her nervous because she knew something about it—either personally or because a family member from years ago had been involved, possibly even her beloved father. But no, what was upsetting Mrs. Valentina was this:

She was back once more in a house she'd thought she would never set foot in again. Back in the house that was destined for the sea, the house she had said

goodbye to weeks ago with tears in her eyes.

The moment I realized that, I was overcome with a profound sense of relief. No matter what, I knew Mrs. Louisa Valentina had had nothing to do with the death of this baby. I seldom trust so strongly to emotion and raw instinct, but that I believed with all my heart.

Brief introductions were made around: Doc Watson in his baseball cap; Dr. Abernathy frowning over the contents of the trunk, which had been dragged into the empty room; and two officers ready to take orders from anyone who happened to have some. The sun was gleaming down through a gray haze just like it had twenty-four hours ago when Meggie and I had been here. A chair was found, and after Mrs. Valentina sat down, she said, "I thought I'd never be in this house again."

I knew I was right: she'd had nothing to do with this crime, if indeed it were a crime. In fact, she was as surprised by the discovery as she was by the existence of the hidden room:

"So, it seems this house has secrets still," she said as Jake turned the bookcase, revealing the room behind it. Then she looked at the rest of us with a small, sad smile on her face. "This was my grandfather's room when I was a little girl. Af-

ter he died, it was shut up for a while. There was nothing in it but books, old furniture. Later I kept my dolls in here—the cases were all along that wall." She pointed out where a long line of ornate glass cases had stood, marked by a gray dust line where the pale wallpaper had long ago faded in the bright sun.

"And you never knew about this hidden room?" Jake asked gently. He pulled up a second chair in front of her, sat down heavily.

"No idea. And I have lived in this house my entire life, sergeant." She met his eyes firmly. She had nothing to hide; couldn't Jake see that?

"We will have a lot of things to ask you," he said to her kindly, "but we needn't ask them here. Will you let me take you home and we can do it there?"

"Whatever you wish, sergeant," she said. "Because I am as bewildered by this as you."

"My great-grandfather was an abolitionist, so I'm not surprised by the closet," she began softly, thoughtfully, her thin white fingers toying with the edge of a blue Wedgwood saucer. Her friend, Attorney Joseph Suddard, who had made the tea, was now sitting silently at her side. Jake was at the table; I was allowed to remain, though I

didn't understand why. This wasn't yet an official police investigation, so what was it? Would it qualify simply as a "fact-finding inquiry"?

"A slave closet," she went on, as though it needed explaining. "I have long suspected it. So perhaps the child—" she bit her bottom lip; it was obvious that the discovery of a child in a long-forgotten corner of her house was deeply upsetting to her—"was born to a black woman, and after it died, it was hidden away. There was no way it could be taken with them—to Canada, you understand—but also no way it could be buried properly. Which I intend to do, sergeant, and at my own expense when this is over."

"Very kind of you, Louisa," Attorney Suddard said, reaching out to touch her hand. He was a well-known and well-liked local lawyer, quiet, soft-spoken, with a full head of silver-gray hair.

"But as I told you earlier, sergeant, that was my grandfather's room when I was a child. Before that I have no idea who used it, though it may have been empty for years. You see, my grandfather was one of two sons. Elliot died in the war at the Battle of Resaca." She turned and looked at me, as though this needed explanation: "During the Civil War, Elliot was a foot soldier, but my grand-

father, Aubrey MacDonald—" back to the sergeant and Officer Fred Andersen, who was busily taking notes—"was a cavalry officer, a war hero promoted in the field by General Philip Sheridan." She paused for effect, lifting her chin a little. "I dearly loved my grandfather. He was a quiet, dignified, deeply religious man. His father was a Presbyterian minister and very active in the abolitionist movement. I have no doubt that the hidden room was at one time part of the Underground Railroad; we are located on the coast, and fishing boats could very easily have taken slaves north to Maine and from there to Canada."

"When was your grandfather born, Mrs. Valentina?" Officer Andersen asked.

"My grandfather?" She was distracted suddenly. "My father was born in 1882, and his father . . . 1830 . . . no, 1832. Imagine that." Again she sought for and looked at me. "At any rate, he was a fabulous horseman. My family owned most of Quinicut Point then, and there were farms up and down it. The MacDonalds leased out their land but were very fair and highly respected landowners. My grandfather died when I was ten."

There's something on her mind, I wanted to say to Jake, something she's afraid to say, and though it may have nothing

at all to do with this investigation, official or not—

"When was that fireplace boarded up, Mrs. Valentina?" I was barely aware it was me speaking. Though I expected Jake to give me a look or tell me to be quiet, he didn't.

So maybe that's why I was here, because Mrs. Valentina liked and trusted me.

"I was afraid of that question," she said, her blue eyes finding mine. Never had I seen them look so tired, nor so sad. "Sometime in the late thirties my father installed oil heat and steam radiators. Three of the fireplaces were removed entirely, but two were just boarded over because the rooms were only being used for storage."

"So he must have seen the trunk in there, or put it there himself—right?" I went on.

"It is unbearable for me to consider that my father knew anything about this, but unfortunately, my discomfort does not make it implausible. Of course he had to have known. However, if the child's remains date from the Civil War era, he couldn't have had anything to do with its death. Could he?" She looked anxiously at Jake.

"And you never heard your father—or your grandfather—mention the existence of the hidden room?" Jake asked.

"My father? Never. My grand-

father—I was a child when he passed away. I have few memories of him. I do remember him sitting in that room in his rocking chair, reading. He had a lot of books, and I remember him quoting the Bible and saying such things as, "This must be God's will." That was his response to the First World War, to the influenza epidemic, and even to Prohibition, which he disapproved of. He had a strong sense of pre-ordination, that things that happened were meant to happen, although . . ." She frowned; we all waited for her to go on. "I was only a child, but I remember others in the family laughing when he said things I didn't understand. When I was older, I wondered if perhaps he wasn't simply being ironic."

"Ironic?" Jake was shifting about in his seat, an obvious signal that this interview was going nowhere.

"Or sarcastic. It barely matters now. He was a good man. He would never have hurt anyone and certainly not a defenseless child."

"Did your father, or grandfather, keep a journal?" This was Fred Andersen again. Jake was being remarkably agreeable about these other questioners; maybe it was some new technique I hadn't heard about.

Mrs. Valentina stared at Offi-

cer Andersen for a moment, surprised, then said, "My father, no, but Grandpa Aubrey did, a war diary. It was donated years ago to the local library. I believe it's in their historical collection."

Jake gave Fred Andersen a meaningful look; someone would be looking into that, no doubt.

"But it has nothing in it but war news," she cautioned them both; she'd read their looks, too. "And he stopped writing in it after the war. He was very depressed. I remember my father talking about it. He said the war changed his father. Elliot had been killed, and he was wounded so badly at Spotsylvania he had to be discharged. He walked with a limp the rest of his life."

"Do you know your grandfather's full military title?" Fred Andersen asked. "Or that of his brother?"

"Elliot was a private in the 33rd Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry." Suddenly she looked confused and just a little bit frightened.

"And your grandfather?"

She didn't answer that, just looked squarely at Jake. "I fail to see how this will help you."

"We can find that out from the state archives or the local historical society," Jake told Fred. Then, in answer to Mrs. Valentina's question, "We've found the remains of an infant, Louisa, in your house. It probably died be-

fore it was a month old, and it looks like it had some very serious birth defects. There may have been other problems, too, things that Dr. Abernathy might be able to uncover. But no one is seeking to place any blame at this time; we are simply looking for answers."

"Well, I'm really very sorry to tell you this, sergeant," she said with some finality to her tone, "but you won't find any here with me." She gave me a last, lingering look, one with just a touch of resentment in it. Was she suddenly angry at me for bringing all this on her? I felt it was so.

I didn't feel right about that "interview," but I said nothing about it to Jake. I'd believed from the beginning that there was no way Louisa Valentina could be involved—and I still felt that way. But I did have the uneasy feeling she was hiding something.

Because why had she jumped to the conclusion—or guess—that the baby had been born to a black woman? And if Mrs. Valentina's family had been active in the Underground Railroad, why wouldn't she know about it? Why would the family keep such a laudable activity a secret? Why not talk about it with pride?

Anyhow, I was thinking about

all these things and doodling pictures of steamer trunks around the margins of my English notebook when I should have been working on grammar lessons. The day's foggy grayness had finally given way to a light rain. It was the forefront of a washed-out hurricane as it banged its way up the coast. We were due for more rain, higher than normal tides over the next twenty-four hours, and some possible "wind damage." So it was next to impossible to concentrate on gerunds and adverb clauses. I was thinking about too many things at once and listening to the creak of my mother's rocking chair as she crocheted and watched the evening news.

Then the phone rang. I didn't move, even though I knew who it had to be:

"Meggie," my mother said softly. "I talked to her mother earlier today." Then she handed me the receiver and quietly left the room.

Her first words, quickly blurted out, were, "Did your mother tell you the awful news? Oh, Herbie!"

I was too stunned to respond immediately, could only say, "News?"

"I may not be able to see you any more! I may have to go and live with my father! She didn't tell you?"

Again, I was too stunned, could only mumble, "What?"

"Oh, Herbie, my mother called my dad when you and I were missing. And he drove all the way down from Quincy, and now he says Mom is doing a terrible job raising me and he's going to court to get custody of me, and I don't want him to do that. Oh, Herbie, I love my father, but I don't want to move again. Do you know what it's like to move all the time and never have a real home, a place that's really yours?"

I wanted to say, yeah I do, but I just made a sound for her to go on.

"He told my mother I've made bad friends, and he doesn't believe for a minute that I made you take me out to that house. He thinks all boys are the same, and the fact that I found that poor little baby and plus your reputation and everything, well, it's so awful! I don't know what to do!"

Finally I put together words that made some sense. "Maybe I can talk to him? Maybe Jake and me together can talk to him, and—"

She cut me off: "I'm not supposed to be talking to you now, but my mother, she's kind of looking the other way if you know what I mean? She called your mother and told her everything. *She* doesn't blame you,



Herbie. Mom really likes you, but my dad can be so headstrong. He's just being horrible. He won't listen to a word anyone says."

"Maybe when he cools down, Meggie—"

"No! He's already made up his mind! I swear if he does this to me I'm going to run away! I will! I swear it!" Her voice got thick, like she was talking with a mouthful of syrup; then I realized she was crying. "Oh no! I hear his car! I have to go! I'll find a way to see you somehow! I will!"

Then she hung up.

The next day was a Saturday, but I lay in bed until ten. I had no energy, no interest, no will to move, get up, even to eat. In fact I might have lain there all day, depressed, uninterested, and uninclined to do anything, but a familiar face stuck his head in the door, startling me.

Mr. Hornton, with Mom just behind him. "Well, what the devil are you doing in bed, boy?" he said in his gruff and impatient way, "You and me, we got work to do, serious work. Historical research. So come on now, you get out of bed, get some breakfast, and we'll get started—pronto!"

"I know all about your problems, boy," Mr. Hornton told me

later as we drove along in his old pickup. The skies were thick and gray, rain coming down relentlessly. I'd lain awake part of the night listening to it beat against the windowpanes. That and the deep drone of the foghorns out in the bay had presented a dreary drumbeat to the confusion I was feeling.

Confusion. Could the never-married Mr. Hornton have any idea what it was like to feel so much for a person, then to have that person torn away from you? And for no particular reason except that her father was a headstrong, unreasonable, hard—

"Your heart and your brain are all mixed up," he said as he turned up his wipers, cursed at the weather, and slowed down for a stop sign you could barely see in the driving rain. "And the girl's parents, they're behaving in a totally irrational way—all because they love their daughter and want the best for her. It's a hell of a confusing world, isn't it?"

"You trying to cheer me up, Mr. Hornton?" I asked, "Because if you are, you're doing a lousy job of it."

"Heck, Herbie, they'll be other girls," he said.

"Not like this one, Mr. Hornton," I said, barely aware of what I was really saying. I felt my face sting; I was blushing. I looked away quickly and pre-

tended interest in the storm. "Where are we going?"

"We're going to find out what Captain Ajack MacDonald wrote in those war diaries of his, that's where we're going. See if he makes any mention of a 'secret room' in his old house, or anything else pertinent for that matter."

"Captain Ajack?"

"That's what his company called him, Captain Ajack, or Captain Aubrey Jackson MacDonald. I got in touch with a friend of mine last night, kind of an authority on the subject, a local history buff. 'Course, this was all with Jake's okay. I wouldn't go butting into police business if I wasn't asked."

"That supposed to be some kind of a crack?" I asked, "You think I go around looking for things to happen? You think I wouldn't go back in time if I could, to have all this *not* happen? I swear I'd drag her out that house by her hair if it meant—" It was just then that a bucketful of water came slamming down on the window. For a moment I thought Mr. Hornton was losing control of his truck. He veered sharply to the right, swore, then pulled into the breakdown lane.

For a full minute we just breathed, and then I said, kind of softly, "The house. It's full moon and high tide in—" I

looked at the clock above his car radio—"a little over two hours. This storm is the remains of a worn-out hurricane; do you think there'll be a storm surge?"

"Hell if I know," he snorted back, still winded. "What do I look like, a damned weather-man?"

"The reason I'm asking is that if there's anything else in that house we have to get we have to get it now. Jake said it can't withstand many more high tides up on that bluff."

"Let's go hear what my friend has to say first," was his response as he put the truck into gear and got it back on the road.

For the first time in my short life—all fourteen years of it—I was allowed into what we kids kind of regarded as a secret, inner sanctum: the Historical Room at the local library. It was one of the few rooms in the library that was kept locked, and we never saw anyone go into it—or come out. So to see Mr. Hornton reach into his pocket and open the door up like it was his own back porch was somewhat surprising.

To be inside was even more so: thick leather sofas and chairs, a huge ebony table supported by four curved legs resting on clawed feet, and heavy, pleated maroon drapes made it look more like an elderly gentle-

man's study than a room in a somewhat unimposing small-town library.

"Martin and I were looking these over until well past midnight," Mr. Hornton said, walking over to the table. He lifted one of the dark, leatherbound volumes off the table. There were five of them along with a few other reference books and a black notebook. "Captain Ajack was a stickler for detail. Do you know he spent eight pages describing—in gory detail—the amputation of a young man's leg right there on the battlefield? Hard to believe a man with such a penchant for minutiae—down to the way the gristle in the frightened kid's leg looked—could all of a sudden just stop writing. Like that." He snapped his fingers.

"You think he wrote more after the war?" I asked, reaching out to touch one of the books. Mr. Hornton put his hand on my wrist.

"Careful, the paper is very brittle. They run from November 1860 through June of 1864. He started them shortly before the war began."

"Eighteen sixty?" I thought for a moment. "To 1864? Then he ended them before the war was over." I thought some more. Maybe it meant nothing, but: "Mrs. Valentina said her grandfather stopped writing after the

war because he was depressed—he'd been badly wounded, and his brother had been killed at Resaca."

"Both are lies."

I turned, surprised to see a somewhat large and elderly gentleman entering the room supported by an aluminum walker.

"Martin." Mr. Hornton went forward to shake the man's hand and introduce me to him: "Herbert Sawyer, Jr., the young man I've been telling you about. Has an extraordinary knack for coming up with puzzles and conundrums for the police—and others—to solve. Herbie, this is Martin Cross, a local authority on the very subject we need help with."

"I'm honored to meet you, son," the man said, steadying himself with one hand and offering me the other. I took it, surprised by the strength in his grip. "So you want to know all about Captain Ajack MacDonald?"

"I guess," was my reply.

"Captain Ajack . . . Aubrey Jackson MacDonald," he corrected himself with a smile as he made his way to a chair. He paused to regain his breath and to wait for Mr. Hornton to shut the door and join him at the table. "The captain was a Civil War hero, hands down. A sterling commanding officer. Well-respected, as well as well-liked,

not an easy combination, especially in that conflict. And a horrible conflict it was, but as recounted in these journals in such meticulous detail—

He turned to look at Mr. Hornton. "Listen to this, Elmer." He read from a page he had marked with a slip of paper: "It is my stated opinion that no one knows what to do with us, or how to use us properly except for General Sheridan. He is the only commander I have encountered who really understands the purpose of a cavalry." He shut the book, took a deep breath, and said, "This account is more arresting and intriguing than any fiction I've ever read. I've thanked Elmer for alerting me to its importance. At last I feel I've found something to occupy me in my declining years. A biography of a man long overlooked."

That was all very nice, I wanted to tell him, but it doesn't help us any. Not Mrs. Valentina, not Jake, and not me.

Especially not me.

"You said—" I figured we may as well cut to the chase—"both are lies. What did you mean?"

Mr. Cross was silent a moment, gave Mr. Hornton a look, then turned back to me: "Captain MacDonald had a spotless career, no question of it. But I've checked the military records. He was never wounded."

I wanted to refute him, to say, "But Mrs. Valentina claimed he had been. He had a limp!" Instead I said, "And the other lie?"

"That his brother died during the war." The man's huge face folded into a thoughtful frown. "And though I don't see how this can help the police in their inquiries, well . . . Elliot MacDonald was a disgrace, possibly the one black mark in Captain MacDonald's history."

"A disgrace?" I looked at Mr. Hornton. Boy, was I confused now.

"He was a deserter, Herbie," Mr. Hornton explained. "The war records indicate that Elliot was mustered in on December first of '63, and he deserted May sixteenth of the following year, shortly after the Battle of Resaca. It's all right here in a history of the Massachusetts 33rd."

I looked back at Mr. Cross. He was sitting with his hands folded high on his chest over his rounded stomach.

"And does Captain MacDonald say that in here?" I pointed at the pile of diaries on the table.

"Indeed not!" Mr. Cross responded. "In fact, there is barely any mention of Elliot in these volumes. A few lines written about the time Elliot joined the 33rd. Here, let me read them to you . . ." He cleared his throat,

riffled to the back of one of the diaries, and read out loud:

"And so imagine my great astonishment to learn that Elliot has volunteered for enlistment in the 33rd. Perhaps this black sheep will yet prove himself worthy of the MacDonald name."

Mr. Cross looked at me. "Then one other reference, in late June, 1864, where Captain MacDonald writes . . ." More riffling, then he read, "I have been granted furlough to attend to this sad business concerning Elliot. I thank the good Lord that our parents are not witness to this, for surely it would have broken their hearts."

"There are only a few more entries after that," Mr. Hornton added.

"Sad business" I murmured, taking a seat at the long, dark table. "Could have meant Elliot was dead."

"But he wasn't. Elliot MacDonald was last seen in Washington with a camp follower and ex-slave, a mulatto woman known as Hattie."

"And Captain MacDonald wasn't wounded." I was thinking out loud. "But why would Mrs. Valentina say he was? She also said he was discharged after Spotsylvania. Was he?"

"Not a reference to it, my boy. See for yourself." And with that he pushed a huge, yellow-jacketed book my way. Its title was

*Massachusetts War Records, 1861-1866.* "The captain was furloughed, yes, but he—" he scratched his head and reached for a notebook lying on the table—"returned to fight with Sheridan at Cedar Creek in October of '64, then was present at Five Forks in April of 1865." He closed the book. "So there was no way he could have been discharged in 1864—the time the diaries end."

"Are you sure?" I insisted. "She said that he limped." I looked at both men, and it was Martin Cross who said, almost cheerfully:

"Well, of course he did. He was born with a clubfoot, which wasn't successfully treated in childhood. That's why his family insisted he learn to ride so well."

**I**t wasn't going to help me with Meggie. Maybe nothing would ever help me with Meggie—except for meeting with her father. And that wasn't something I was looking forward to, any more than I was looking forward to being dropped off at Mrs. Valentina's house by a reluctant Mr. Hornton.

"I'm just asking questions, Mr. Hornton; that's all I'm doing," I told him. The rain had let up a bit, but the wind was driving down; two of the shutters on Mrs. Valentina's small new

house had been blown off, and the light in her driveway was swinging wildly back and forth.

"I'll let you try your way, give you thirty minutes, and then I'm back, Herbie."

"Fine." I turned up my collar, jumped out, and ran up to her door.

I found her sitting at her kitchen table. There was a pot of water on the stove for tea, and a black and white cat was curled on the kitchen chair beside her. Apparently she'd been writing letters; there was a box of envelopes tied in blue ribbon on the table. She was surprised to see me, and possibly not too happy, but she hid it as she let me in out of the rain.

Then her eyes fell on the box of letters, and I realized they were old and yellowed. In the corners of the envelopes were old fashioned green stamps. She hadn't been sitting there writing, she'd been reading.

"May I be perfectly frank with you, Herbie?" she said to me, her lively blue eyes suddenly stark sober as she referred to an incident we'd both been involved in a short time ago. "You haven't exactly made my life easy these last few months."

"I know, ma'am," I said, meaning it. "I'm sorry about it, too."

"Take off that wet jacket. And have a seat," she said with a wave of her hand. Then with a

sigh she stood behind the other chair, her thin white hands grasping the top rail. "I suppose it was only a matter of time. The police couldn't just let this go, could they? Nor, for that matter, could you."

It was a statement, not a question, but I responded to it with, "Any newly discovered death, Mrs. Valentina, no matter how old has to be investigated. You know that."

"Imagine a fourteen-year-old boy telling me that! Still, I want you to know—and to believe—I had no idea that poor little child was behind the fireplace all these years." She sighed again and seemed to stumble forward. I put aside my jacket and went to help her sit down. "I'm starting to think that maybe that house, with all its secrets, should have been washed out to sea years ago."

"When we first met, you didn't want the house to be moved," I said. I slid onto a corner of the chair the cat was sleeping in. "And we . . . I mean the police thought they'd figured out why that was. But you had more than one reason for wanting the house to stay put, didn't you?"

She put her hand over the letters protectively. "As a child you hear things, Herbie, and you think you understand what's being said. But later you understand, ironically so, that

the people you loved have misled you. Oh, the memory is intact, but the meaning was frayed. My grandfather, sitting there in his rocking chair, he meant it when he said the war killed Elliot, but he meant it in a different way."

"I know. I just found out. Elliot MacDonald was a deserter."

"And Aubrey MacDonald was a war hero. Can you imagine the shame my grandfather felt?"

"Because his brother was a deserter?" I asked carefully, watching her reaction. "Or because he fathered a child by an ex-slave?"

"That child wasn't my grandfather's!" she cried. "It was Elliot's!"

"Does it say that in those letters?" I nodded at them, still guarded by her thin white hand.

"No." She pulled her trembling fingers away. "These are letters written to the woman who would be my grandmother." A thin-lipped smile creased her face. "I needed to convince myself that my grandfather was a good man. These are the letters I wouldn't let my father burn."

"And did your father burn the other diaries? The ones that continued after June of 1864?"

"No. He hid them. My father donated those he thought were of historical importance and the rest he hid, to be destroyed later. He said there was no need

for people to know about our family's troubles."

"Do you still have the other diaries?"

She looked at me, her eyes slowly glazing over. "I left them in the house."

"Where in the house?"

"This is one time the house wins, Henry," she said. "I'll see to it that the poor little thing is laid to rest in my family's burial plot, but everything else dies with the house."

Suddenly I knew what I had to do: I grabbed my waterlogged jacket, started for the door.

"No!" she called out behind me. When I turned, her face looked sad, old, frightened. "The house won't be safe, not now."

I pretended ignorance. "High tide isn't for four, five hours. I'll have time. Where are the diaries?"

"There is a word for you, Mr. Herbert Sawyer," she said. "Do you know it? Indefatigable."

"You'll protect a man who's been dead, what—sixty, seventy years? Why? Family honor? Family pride?"

But she just looked at me, refusing to answer. I quickly calculated this: it might indeed be too late. If the storm took the house now, there might never be any way of knowing what really happened. So I did a cruel thing, something I knew at the time:

"I'm going, Mrs. Valentina." A



quick glance at her kitchen clock. "I figure I can make it out to Quinicut in an hour or so. The rain is starting to let up. But do me a favor? Call Jake and tell him where I'm going. Tell him to meet me—"

She cut me off. "Aubrey went home because he'd heard from one of his tenants that Elliot was staying at one of the farmhouses he owned. But when he got home, Elliot was there, with the black woman, Hattie. Elliot wanted money from his brother. He and Hattie were on their way to Canada, but first they had to wait for—" She paused, and I stepped forward.

"For Hattie to give birth to a child, a child with multiple birth defects," I said. "A cleft palate. Two clubfeet. Both defects ran in the family. Aubrey MacDonald had a clubfoot. Didn't he?"

Nodding sadly, she went on. "The child lived only a few days. It couldn't nurse properly. Hattie must have . . . she must have wrapped it up and put it in the chest in the closet. And that I didn't know. I really didn't know." She looked at me briefly. "My grandfather was distraught, and he left the house. When he came back, he found his brother beating Hattie and quoting from the Bible. It was more than my grandfather could bear, and he struck Elliot."

"This is all recorded in the missing diaries?"

"Yes." She put both hands to her chest.

"And where will I find them, Mrs. Valentina?" I put my coat back down, knowing I was going nowhere.

"In the cellar where I put them. They're in a small lead-lined chest, next to the spot where my grandfather buried Elliot."

Two days later we stood out on Quinicut Road and watched as the house tipped forward, making a creaking, grating sound as walls snapped and beams broke in two. Then as a cloud of seagulls screamed in riot overhead, the house on the edge toppled over the bluff and into the raging surf.

There were no camera crews on hand. No one told them in time. It was only us there. Mrs. Valentina and her friend Mr. Suddard. Mr. Hornton was there, too, with Martin Cross watching from the front seat of Mr. Hornton's pickup. Jake couldn't make it; he was out on a call.

And as I stood apart from all of them, I felt a gulf, an immense hole inside of me. Someone else was supposed to be there with me.

But she wasn't there.

# UNSOLVED

by  
Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the November issue.*

Sheriff Kenny Ryder dismounted in front of the hotel and slung the reins of his tired and dusty mount over the hitching rail: "Somebody hadda lotta nerve," he drawled.

"Yeah," said Deputy Ollie Wright, "shootin' the banker and makin' off with all thet gold fer the payroll of the Esposito gold mine up thar in the hills."

"I wuz thinkin', Ollie, thet whosoever named this place Boom City had more imagination than horse sense. Jest six places of business, countin' the bank, all bunched up east to west along the stage route."

"Real purty, though," remarked Deputy Wright. "All fresh paint and all diffrent colors. Who do you think did it?"

"Has to be one of the men livin' here. No strangers been sighted in these parts, and the last stagecoach come through three days afore the shootin'."

"But somebody musta seen him," objected Wright.

"Nope. He coulda ducked out the back door of the bank and into his kitchen quicker'n a sidewinder on a hot rock. *Somebody* shot Jonathan Rockford in front of his open safe at sundown on Friday, and thet somebody ain't fur away this minute. Let's hear their stories." Sheriff Ryder called the surviving residents of Boom City together. "Naow," he said, "I want nothin' but straight talk, y'understand? Well, git started."

(1) Mr. Alexander stated: "We each live behind our business. I heard the shot come from the west. At first I thought it was Del shooting out his back window at varmints behind the red building next door to him. I ran out, looked down the street in that direction, and saw the hardware dealer come outside from his store."

(2) Mr. Baker declared: "I was in my place of business next to the bank, having just returned from the grocery some minutes before."

Looking in the direction of the shot, I saw the hotel keeper come out at the same time as Mr. Cobb; they asked the owner of the green store, who was already standing outside his place of business, what had happened. Mr. Rockford lent Abe, Chuck, and me the money to start our businesses here."

(3) Mr. Cobb said: "I had just started a fire in my kitchen stove. Wondering where the shot came from, I ran out the door and looked down the street. I saw Mr. Alexander stick his head out, then the hardware dealer at the far end of town, both coming out of their places of business. We got together in front of the orange building trying to figure out what the shooting was about. The hotel owner once had words with the deceased when the bank was being painted because some of the yellow paint splashed onto his place of business next door."

(4) Mr. Dundee testified: "As I ran out, I saw Edgar come out of his place of business. He started toward me, then yelled in at the grocer next door to him. The grocer's hard of hearing, but he came out to join Edgar. The two of them walked toward me, and we met in front of the saloon. Both the hotel keeper (who is not in the blue building) and Mr. Enderly knew Mr. Rockford before they came to Boom City."

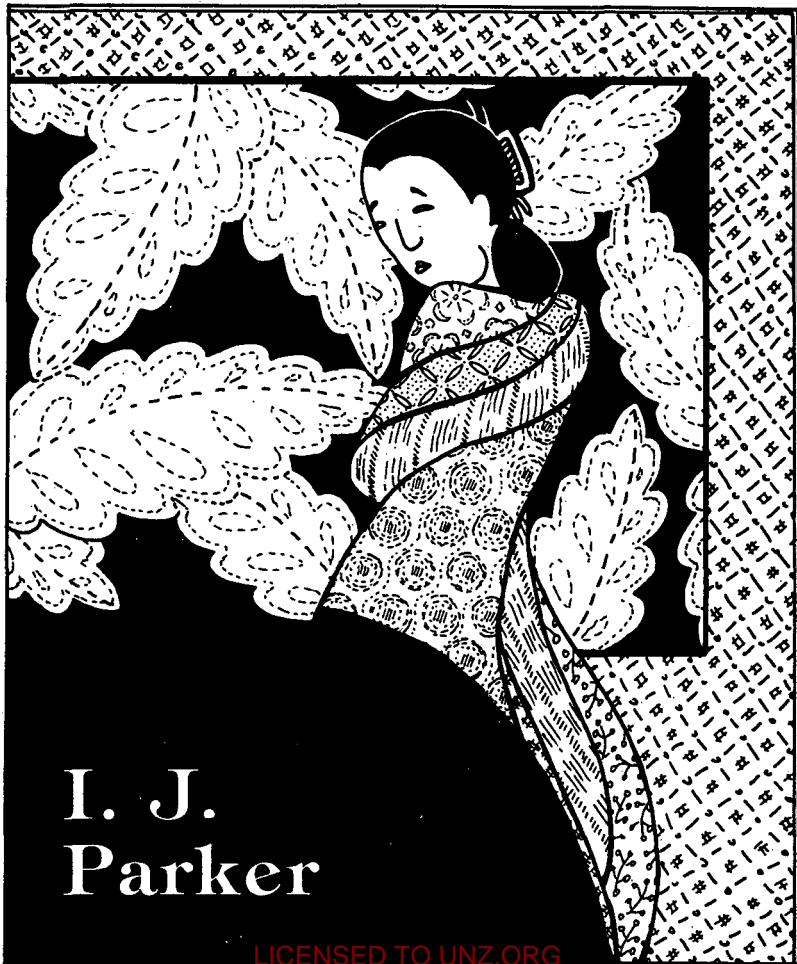
(5) Mr. Enderly asserted: "I was inside my place of business, having locked up for the night. My neighbor in the blue building came by, and we went together toward the bank. Chuck, the blacksmith, and Mr. Dundee live in the red, white, and blue buildings. I guess one of them was the first to discover the body. Chuck and the hardware dealer said later they weren't sure at first where the shot came from. Bert and the saloon keeper next door to him were talking about the murder this very morning."

"Wal-ll," declared Sheriff Ryder, "I've heard enough of this palaver. One of yew five is a lyin' polecat, and I'll bet a saddlebag of silver dollars he shot the banker and stole the gold."

*Who shot Rockford, stole the gold, and then lied at the hearing? (It was under the floor in his kitchen that the sheriff found the gold.)*

FICTION

# Instruments of Murder



I. J.  
Parker

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**H**IAN-KYO (KYOTO), ELEVENTH CENTURY JAPAN, LEAF-CHANGING MONTH (SEPTEMBER).

Lord Sugawara—Akitada to family and friends—was playing his new flute to the breaking dawn. He was constrained to practice in the far corner of his garden, in a vine-covered shack well away from the main house, because his efforts grated on the ears of his household. They were too polite to say so but had a habit of scattering every time he pulled out his beloved flute.

For this reason he was surprised to see his secretary Seimei running toward him over the smooth stones of the old path. He broke off a tender rendition of "The Village in the Forest" and asked, "What's the matter?"

The elderly man stopped breathlessly and wiped beads of perspiration from his wrinkled brow. It was already hot and humid, though summer was past. "I'm very sorry, sir," he gasped, "but there is a constable at the gate. He says that Tora has been arrested for a double murder."

Akitada's mouth fell open. "Tora? A double murder?"

"I'm afraid so, sir. The earth always shakes when we least expect it."

Akitada sighed and tucked his flute into his sleeve. "There is some mistake, of course, but I

had better go and see. Bring me my cap and tell my wife that I have been called away."

"I brought your cap, sir." Seimei produced it from his voluminous sleeve along with a small bronze mirror. He said smugly, "They say, 'Have an umbrella ready before it rains!'"

Peering into the mirror, Akitada adjusted the stiff black silk cap on his topknot and tied the black cords under his chin. "Very well. If you haven't done so already, you might send to the ministry and tell them I'll be a little late. It shouldn't take long to clear this up."

But he met with difficulties the moment he arrived at the office of the warden of the Eastern River Village, a pleasure quarter on the left bank of the Kamo. Clearly his name meant nothing to the fat warden and redcoated constable, and the colored trim on his hat denoting his rank passed unnoticed. The warden merely stared rudely as the constable snapped, "No one is admitted. Orders of the Metropolitan Police."

"Announce my presence to the person in charge or I shall report your insolence!" Akitada snapped.

The warden opened his mouth, thought better of it, and disappeared. The sound of muffled voices came from the rear of

the building. Someone shouted, "Not that Sugawara?" The warden's reply was inaudible, but the other voice was still raised in frustration: "Get rid of him! Any way you like! That's all I need! The amateur snoop!"

Akitada cast a glance at the impassive face of the constable, sighed, and then went to sit on a grimy mat in the corner.

After a moment he drew his flute from his sleeve and began to play the opening notes of "The Village in the Forest."

The inner door opened abruptly and an official wearing a red tunic and the insignia of a police inspector on his silk cap burst into the room.

"Who is making this infernal noise?" he shouted. His eyes fell on Akitada. He took in the silk robe and the blue rank trim on his cap and swallowed. Bowing deeply, he said, "Forgive this humble person, sir. This filthy hovel distorts sound dreadfully."

"Really?" Akitada looked about him vaguely. "I'm Sugawara. You have a servant of mine in custody?"

"Oh!" The inspector looked as if he had bitten on a cherry stone with a sore tooth. He waved his hands and said quickly, "It is nothing, sir. Nothing at all to require your attention. Merely a small matter of ob-

"Not a double murder?" Akitada sounded disappointed.

"No! No! A silly mistake of the local authorities. Your man came across two bodies and called the warden, who did not like his manner and arrested him. The case is solved."

"You have solved both murders?"

"Oh yes, yes! One murder only. A beggar stabbed a drunken wrestler during a robbery and then succumbed to his evil deed."

"I beg your pardon?"

"He died of natural causes near his victim. It closes the case."

Akitada's eyebrows shot up. "That is very strange indeed. Perhaps I might have a look?" He rose smoothly and tucked the flute back into his sleeve.

The inspector cleared his throat. "Er . . . ah . . . I'm expecting the coroner any moment . . ."

"No trouble at all, my dear fellow," Akitada said breezily, striding purposefully towards the door. "It is a sort of hobby of mine, you know. You may not be aware of it, but I have been able to solve a number of puzzling crimes in the past. I should be delighted to offer my views on this case."

The inspector gulped and moved aside. "Er . . . there is really no case . . . down the hall

and to the left," he said, watching helplessly as Akitada disappeared into a room.

The dead men lay naked on grimy straw mats on the floor. One appeared to be in his thirties or early forties, a big, handsome man with muscular legs and arms and a belly that showed signs of turning to flab. Several stab wounds in the left chest and side had torn the thick skin, bleeding profusely down the left side of his belly, groin, and upper thigh. The cause of death was obvious, but Akitada peered at the wounds, measuring their width and placement, touching the skin and dried blood, and moving fingers and wrists. Then he turned to the other body.

This man was in most respects the opposite. He was elderly—at least sixty, thought Akitada—short, fat, and unhealthy looking. His arms and legs were pitifully thin and weak. Akitada inspected every inch of the body, paying particular attention to the scalp and face, but found no wounds, only a trickle of blood from one nostril and ear. For a few moments he stood pursing his lips and pulling his left earlobe. Then he bent again to check the dead man's palms, fingernails, and the soles of his feet.

The inspector, who had watched impatiently, offered a

comment now. "That's the killer. A common beggar. They hang about the riverfront begging from drunks returning from parties. When times get bad, they turn to robbery. This one must've found the wrestler sleeping it off—you can still smell the wine on the fellow—and tried to get his money from his belt. No doubt the wrestler caught him at it, and the beggar had no choice but to kill him."

Akitada looked at the policeman. "With what?" he asked.

The inspector pointed to a package wrapped in oiled paper. "A short sword. We found it in a rainbarrel near the site."

Akitada unwrapped the parcel, exclaimed in surprise, and reverently raised a short sword, perfectly clean, its slim, graceful blade mounted on a grip of black metal heavily inlaid in pure gold with a design of waving grasses. "How did the beggar get a sword like this?" he asked. "For that matter, what makes you think he is a beggar?"

"His clothes, sir." The inspector indicated two bundles in the corner. "As to the sword, we cannot be sure yet, but he either took it from the victim or stole it somewhere earlier."

Akitada grunted. He undid the first bundle and found the beggar's rags: a torn grey robe, its tattered bottom so short it



must barely have covered his bare legs, for there was nothing else except the white loincloth. The robe was horribly stained with blood on the front, the right side, and the right sleeve. The loincloth was quite clean. Akitada frowned, holding up the garments and looking from them to the corpses and back again. Then he put them down and took up the wrestler's clothes: a loincloth, a silk under-robe, a sky blue cotton outer robe with a large white pattern of waves and cranes, and a black and white checked cotton sash. Both robes were slashed and blood-soaked in the chest area, and the sash and loincloth were partially stained with blood. He nodded and put them back.

"May I now see my servant?" he asked.

Tora crouched in the corner of a bare cell in the back of the warden's house. His face was bruised and his hands and feet were chained, but he greeted Akitada with a grin.

"Knew you'd come right away, sir. I told the fools you'd straighten them out in short order. Never saw a warden as stupid as this one. Have you seen the bodies? Any idea what happened?"

Akitada raised his hand. "Not so fast! I should be the one to ask you what happened."

"The victim is Kiyomura, a

fourth rate wrestler. I've never laid eyes on the other fellow. I had supper with Kiyomura and a few others at the Phoenix Pavilion, a restaurant on the river. It was hot, and the Phoenix Pavilion has balconies hanging over the water. There's a cool breeze with a fine view of the city and of pleasure barges with lots of pretty girls in them, and they serve an excellent cheap wine."

"Never mind all that."

"Kiyomura used to be a pretty decent wrestler, but this year he didn't place at all. Too much high living."

"How did he support himself?"

Tora shook his head. "It's a mystery. Last night he had plenty of money. Bragged that he'd found his own gold mine and talked about gifts from an admirer."

"Sometimes wrestlers enjoy the attentions of male patrons. Could that have been the case here?"

"Not him. He was always going on about women. His latest lady love is supposed to be a great beauty. At least Ando claims she is."

"Ando?"

"One of the other fellows. A raw youngster, but he's a talented painter and he was nagging Kiyomura about this girlfriend. Wanted to paint her as the goddess Kwannon."

Tora chuckled. "Ando's at the age where every pretty face looks like a goddess. Kiyomura was his hero. And he treated the poor kid like a stray dog. Come to think of it, Ando was supposed to walk Kiyomura home. Kiyomura was drunk when I left."

"Might Ando have had a reason to kill his idol?"

"Oh, come on! He's just a boy. But Kiyomura had a cruel streak, especially when he drank. He made fun of Ando, who was getting pretty sensitive." Tora shook his head. "No. I'll never believe it. For that matter, Kiyomura quarrelled with just about everybody last night."

"Oh?"

"Well, he made Saemon and Hiraga angry. Saemon's a pharmacist with a shop near the bridge in the city, but most of his custom comes from the River Village. He does a wonderful business in aphrodisiacs, ointments, massages, needle therapy, and *moxa*." Tora shuddered. "Never could understand people who like to be stuck with needles or have herbal pills burned on their backs. Hiraga's a swordsmith. What's the matter?"

Akitada's brows had shot up. "A swordsmith? Is he a good one?"

"The best! A real craftsman."

I've wondered why he bothered with the rest of us. He has a large family, and he's more serious and settled. Of course, Saemon's married, but Saemon has a beautiful young wife and no children. Ugly fellow, Saemon, but he saved up and bought out one of the top courtesans in the village. Kiyomura never missed a chance to rib Saemon."

"So Kiyomura managed to insult the painter Ando and this Saemon last night. What about the swordsmith?"

"He did worse than that with Hiraga. He slapped him. I thought Hiraga would kill him then and there." Tora broke off in dismay. "Forget that. Hiraga calmed down, and Kiyomura apologized."

"I don't suppose Hiraga had one of his swords with him?"

Tora looked uncomfortable. "Well, he always carries a short sword. Used to drive Kiyomura crazy. Kiyomura wanted to buy it, but Hiraga wouldn't sell to him. Told him to stick to wrestling; swords were for swordsmen."

"Hm." Akitada pulled his earlobe and thought for a moment. Then he got up. "Luckily that inspector does not seem to suspect you any longer, but I don't like this case. I'll have you released, and you will take me to talk to your friends."

As the inspector was seeing

them out with ill-concealed relief, they met a constable walking in with a slight, sallow-faced man in a plain dark blue robe.

"Saemon," cried Tora. "What are you doing here?"

The pharmacist had a long, lantern-jawed face and sparse ill-kept hair, but the black eyes were sharp and intelligent and moved instantly from Tora to Akitada. There was a flicker of interest, and then the man was bowing very humbly.

Tora made the introductions, adding, "Saemon can testify to Kiyomura's temper last night. Is that why you're here, Saemon? To give a statement?"

"No, no, Tora. I was called to examine the bodies. My place is just across the bridge, and I happened to be home. A terrible thing, but I'm afraid I know nothing about it. I left the restaurant hours before the rest of you." Saemon clutched his bamboo case of medicines and instruments with long, sinewy fingers and looked at the inspector.

"If you'll excuse us?" The inspector pointedly held the door open for Akitada and Tora and bowed them out.

"So the pharmacist lives nearby," Akitada remarked as they were walking away from the warden's office.

"Yes. Look!" Tora pointed at a stand of willows on the river.

bank where a huddle of locals stood talking and staring at a dark-stained patch of weeds. "That's where it happened."

Akitada nodded without much interest, glancing briefly at the rainbarrel of the first house they passed. "Let's talk to the young painter first," he said.

Ando lived in the city, not far from the bridge, in a narrow tenement, where he shared quarters with other single people of modest means. Many of them clearly kept late hours, for the doors were closed and sounds of snoring filled the narrow, dark hallways. A slatternly young female, no more than a child but with smudged paint staining her lips and round cheeks, blinked sleepily at them from a doorway.

"Ando?" she said vaguely. "Oh, he's down that way. The last room on the right." She called after them, "Stop by on your way out. I can show you something better than pictures."

They found the painter, his attempt at growing a mustache emphasizing his boyish looks, in a frenzy of destruction. He was ripping apart a scroll of ink sketches, balling up the pieces, and flinging them violently about a room that was perfectly bare except for a large painting of a goddess and a box of paints.

The goddess was impressive but faceless.

When he saw his visitors, a look of panic replaced the angry scowl. "Tora," he cried, "what do you want?" He dropped the shredded sketchbook and began to kick the pieces into a corner. Akitada picked one up and straightened it out.

"Please don't look at it, sir!" cried the painter. "Here, give it to me. They are just old scribbles. I have better stuff, if you're interested."

The sketch showed the face of a young woman, her hair coiled behind her head and a small caste mark between her eyes in the manner of Buddhist deities. Akitada glanced at the painting. "I think it is a charming face for your Kwannon," he said. "Most of the paintings of the goddess depict round-faced Chinese matrons. I like this Japanese beauty very much better."

The young painter snatched at the sketch. "No. It's all wrong!"

"Ando, relax," said Tora. "This is my master, and we're not here about your painting. Last night Kiyomura was killed on the other side of the river."

"Kiyomura dead?" Ando's arms dropped to his sides. "I had nothing to do with it."

"We did not imply that you did," said Akitada, putting the sketch into his sleeve. "But you were to accompany your friend

home last night. What happened?"

Ando paled. "I didn't. He sent me away. He was quite well when I left. I swear it."

"Don't be a cursed fool, Ando!" cried Tora. "He wasn't well when I left. He was drunk and mean, and you know it. How did you expect him to get home in that state?"

Ando's livid features flushed. "And why should I care?" he cried. "The bastard has never had a word of thanks for anything I've ever done. Just, 'Hey, boy, fetch me some wine from the wineshop, I'll pay you later!' or 'Stop hanging around like some hungry cur!', or 'When's the last time your mother gave you suck, you baby?' When I . . ." He broke off and turned to the painting of the goddess. Picking up a small knife used to trim brushes, he slashed at the goddess's elegant robes and veils, her dainty hands and feet, and the coiled dark hair on her bejewelled faceless head. "I'm not a child!" he wept. "I'm a man! I'll show him! I'll show them all!"

"In the name of Buddha, Ando," cried Tora.

"Come, Tora," said Akitada, taking his arm. "He needs to be alone."

Outside Tora said, "We should have kept at him. I've never seen him so upset. I bet there's a

woman behind it. Kiyomura's latest courtesan, I expect."

Akitada stopped abruptly. "Courtesan," he muttered. "Perhaps . . . the motive is there . . . and it would explain . . . but how to prove it?" He shook his head in puzzlement.

At that moment they were rudely interrupted by two constables, who ran up, twisted Tora's arms behind his back, and tied them with chains before either of them could protest.

"Sorry, sir," cried the inspector, panting up behind them, "but we must arrest your servant again. New information."

"What, in the name of the ten judges of hell?" snarled Tora, struggling between the scowling constables and getting viciously prodded with their steel rods.

"You were heard to threaten the victim," said the inspector, catching his breath.

"That cursed Saemon! I might have known he'd make trouble."

The inspector looked at Akitada, shook his head regretfully, and said with feeling, "Believe me, sir, I'd do anything to avoid this. But your servant was found on the scene, his robe bloodstained—" he cast a glance at Tora's sleeve, which did show some rust-colored splotches "—and now we have two witnesses who say that he was threatening the victim's life only hours before the murder."

Akitada looked at Tora, who had paled and mumbled, "We had a small disagreement at the Phoenix Pavilion. The waitress must've heard. And I checked Kiyomura's body. That's how I got his blood on me."

"You should have told me. What did you argue about?"

Tora looked away. "He said some things about you, sir."

Akitada bit his lip. The gossip about his fascination with crime was not flattering. Touching the inspector's sleeve, he pleaded, "Why not wait till you finish your investigation? What about the identity of the second man or the owner of the sword?"

The inspector stepped back. "The investigation is in the hands of the Metropolitan Police, sir," he said in an official tone.

"Inspector, it is essential that a very careful autopsy be performed on the second victim . . ."

The inspector's face stiffened. He snapped, "Autopsies have been performed and have confirmed earlier findings. That is all I may tell you at this time." He turned his back on Akitada and motioned to his constables to proceed with their prisoner.

"Wait! I must have a word with my servant before you leave."

"Are you not coming with us,

sir?" Tora asked Akitada in a low voice.

"No, Tora. I think my time is better spent solving this mystery. How do I find the swordsmith's place?"

Tora explained, adding loudly, for the benefit of the inspector and the constables, "Don't worry about me, sir. I know you will be back with the name of the real killer in no time at all."

Akitada made one last appeal to the inspector. "The so-called beggar's identity must be verified. . . ." he began, but they were already moving away from him.

Neither his certainty that Tora was innocent nor his virtual certainty about the killer was particularly reassuring at this moment. Knowing a thing was not the same as proving it. Moreover, as Tora was now officially charged with murder, questioning would begin immediately, and this involved vicious beatings until the suspect's resistance was broken and he confessed. The situation had suddenly turned ominous.

**H**iraga lived in a street of prosperous craftsmen, but his home was modest. From inside Akitada could hear children's voices and the sound of metal striking metal. As soon as he opened the creaking bamboo gate, a small boy appeared and

was joined immediately by three others, each slightly bigger than the first. They stood and stared at him.

Akitada's face broke into a big smile. "Good morning!"

The boys blushed furiously and retreated. The smallest took off running, shouting for his mother, a short, chubby woman who appeared, flustered, with a baby strapped to her back and wiping wet hands on her apron.

"Welcome to this humble house." She bowed several times, waking the baby, who blinked at the bright sunlight and set up a wail. Its mother jiggled it, saying, "Please come in and forgive my rude children. If you have come to place an order, my husband will soon be free."

"Mrs. Hiraga?" Akitada asked, slipping off his shoes and stepping up to the oiled wooden floor in his white socks. He smiled at the squalling child.

"Yes." She blushed and touched her apron. "Please forgive my dirty clothes. There is much work with the children. We have eight of them, and they are a constant shame to their parents."

"On the contrary. You are blessed." Akitada took out his flute and blew a few notes. The baby fell silent, gulped, and stared with open mouth.

Akitada exchanged a smile with its mother. "Your husband is a lucky man."

She blushed with pleasure. "Five unmannerly boys and three useless girls," she sighed. "We are a great burden to him."

The noise in the back of the house had ceased abruptly, and the swordsmith appeared.

"Welcome to my humble home," he said with a bow, sliding open a door, and nodding to his wife. Akitada entered a large room that contained nothing but two or three cushions and many swords of all sizes displayed on carved wooden stands or on hooks on the walls, some in beautifully worked scabbards, others showing their naked blades of bluish steel. Akitada admired them, taking one or two to test their weight and balance. He complimented Hiraga on his superb workmanship.

"I have far to go in my craft," the swordsmith said. "Is the gentleman a swordsman?"

"My name is Sugawara, and I am here on another matter."

Hiraga indicated the cushions, and Akitada seated himself. Hiraga joined him, looking politely expectant, while Mrs. Hiraga, without baby; brought wine and a plate of pickled vegetables. She served them and seated herself near the door.

Akitada praised the wine and then said, "The wrestler Ki-

yomura was murdered last night."

"Kiyomura murdered?" Hiraga started up, then knelt and bowed. "Forgive me, sir. How stupid of me! You must be Tora's master. What happened?"

"Please be seated. Tora has been arrested. He found the body, and a man called Saemon told the authorities that Tora had threatened the victim's life."

"Saemon's a fool." Hiraga made a face. "Kiyomura was very drunk and made all of us angry last night. It meant nothing. How did he die?"

"He was stabbed several times on his way home, probably with a short sword found in a rain-barrel nearby."

Hiraga stiffened. "A short sword?"

"Yes. Possibly one of yours. The handle is very dark, almost black, with an inlay of golden reeds on the grip and sword guard."

There was a loud gasp from the door.

Hiraga said nothing but rose and left the room. When Akitada turned to look after him, he caught an expression of abject terror on the wife's face. Hiraga, however, returned in a moment, carrying another short sword. He extended it to Akitada, saying, "This is the one I carried last night."

Akitada received it with a cer-



emonious bow. It was beautiful and very similar to the murder weapon except that grip and hilt were ornamented with a silver filigree of leaves and flowers. Its blade, like those on display, had a fine blue sheen lacking in the sword found by the police. Akitada commented on this.

"Water damages the metal. No true swordsman would throw a fine blade into a rainbarrel." Hiraga's voice was tight with anger or nerves. "That is why I do not sell my swords into improper hands. The other sword . . . it may be one of mine, but I did not have it last night." There was an awkward pause, during which he glanced at his wife, and he added, "However, you said Kiyomura was stabbed. You will notice that the blade of a sword is bent slightly upward. The sharpness is underneath. It is not effective for stabbing, as anyone familiar with swords will tell you."

Akitada nodded. "You are quite right. Still, would it be possible to kill a man using this sword like a knife?"

"Yes. But only someone completely unfamiliar with swords would do such a thing." Hiraga glanced again towards his wife, who seemed to have become smaller, to have shrunk into herself.

"Or a man who wished others to think so," Akitada said softly.

"As you say, my lord." The swordsmith's face was expressionless. There was a soft sob and the sound of the door closing.

"Thank you. You have been very helpful." Akitada got up, followed by his host. In the hallway they passed a hanging calligraphy scroll with a Chinese verse. It read, "Alive man is a passing traveler—dead, a man come home. One brief journey between heaven and earth." Akitada paused and said, "It is true that man's life is short and uncertain, but his greatest blessing is his family."

For a moment Hiraga looked surprised; then he nodded slowly and bowed.

The pharmacist's house was on the riverbank two doors downriver from the bridge. A large sign advertised all sorts of cures and treatments. An older woman with a suspicious look answered Akitada's knock at the peeling door. "The doctor's been called away, and his wife is still abed," she said sharply.

"I will wait till he returns. Please let your mistress know I am here."

"I am the doctor's sister," she snapped, leading him to a room with dirty mats and a tattered screen decorated with garish flowers and birds. She muttered under her breath, "Mistress!

That one? Honest women rise with the dawn and serve their husbands, but not this one. A harlot. Singing lewd songs, gallivanting about till all hours, and then sleeping the day away." She tossed a cushion on the floor for him and flounced out of the room, leaving Akitada to bide his time while women's voices, raised in lengthy and angry argument, assaulted his ears.

But the former courtesan surprised Akitada. She lacked the vulgarity he had expected. A slender young woman in a pale blue silk gown, she came in quietly carrying a flask and two cups and greeted him with the relaxed informality found only in upper-class courtesans.

"Forgive the wine, your honor," she said in a melodious voice, giving him a practiced glance from under long lashes. "I am afraid it is not what you are used to."

"Your company will more than make up for it," Akitada said with a smile.

"My husband will return soon. I hope your honor is not in ill health?"

"No, no. Tell me, do you know the painter Ando?"

She frowned prettily. "I don't think so."

Akitada pulled the sketch from his sleeve. "He did this for the head of a painting of Kwan-non. It looks like you."

She looked, smiled, shook her head. "You flatter me, sir—" another sidelong glance and smile—"but it is not of me. Only the hairstyle is similar." Her hand touched the coil of glossy hair on her neck with practiced grace.

"My mistake. I stopped at his place to tell him of the death of a friend, the same reason I came to see your husband."

"How sad!"

"Yes. A wrestler by the name of Kiyomura."

"Ki—" Her voice failed.

Akitada, pretending not to notice her shock, the sick pallor of her face, took his flute from his sleeve and blew a few notes. "The police blame vagrants. They are searching for the killer now." He blew a few more trills. "The weapon was a sword by Hiraga. I hope you don't mind my playing. I have so little time to practice."

"No." Her eyes wandered about the room. Akitada played, watching her hands twist the silk of her gown.

"Do you have to play that tune?" she cried suddenly.

Akitada lowered his flute with a look of surprise. "You don't like love songs? Oh. The murder of Kiyomura. Forgive me. Yes. Very sad. An athlete at the beginning of his career. Perhaps you have heard of him?"

"Kiyomura had no honor," she cried bitterly. "Why should I

care that someone killed him? He used women like paper tissues, soiled them and threw them away."

"So you were his lover," Akitada said softly. "The painter must have seen you together and made the sketch from memory."

"You must despise me," she said with a shudder. "Once a whore, always a whore! That is what my husband's sister says. But Kiyomura and I, we fell in love a long time ago, before Saemon met me. Back when I was very young and when Kiyomura was different. I would have gone with him to hell itself, but he was married to his sport." She laughed bitterly. "We both changed." She covered her face with trembling hands. "Kiyomura is nothing to me, nothing!" she cried.

Akitada looked thunderstruck. Then, in his gentlest voice, he lied. "You are wrong. He loved you all his life, you know. That is why he failed at wrestling."

She lowered her hands. Her cheeks were wet with tears. "Truly?"

The sliding door flew back on squeaking tracks, and her husband walked in. "What's this?" he cried, glaring at his wife. "How dare you dishonor my house by entertaining men in my absence?"

She rose with a quiet restraint

Akitada admired and said, "Lord Sugawara has come to see you, husband."

Saemon recognized Akitada belatedly. He snapped to his wife, "Put on something decent! You look like the slut you are." Seating himself across from Akitada, he muttered, "Sorry, my lord."

Akitada raised his brows haughtily and let his eyes move over Saemon's shabby blue cotton robe.

Saemon fidgeted. "I hope you will pardon this humble place. I am a poor man. Is it about the Kiyomura matter?"

"Yes. I am told you laid certain charges against Tora while suppressing other evidence? I wondered why."

Saemon flushed. "I told the truth. It could not be helped."

"All of you quarreled with the wrestler. All of you had cause to kill him."

"Not I."

"On the contrary. You had the best motive of all."

Saemon bared yellow teeth in an attempt at a smile. "Your Honor jokes."

The sliding door opened, and Saemon's sister came in with more wine and another cup. Noticing Saemon's clothes, she asked, "Why are you wearing that old thing? What happened to your grey robe?" Without waiting for an answer she de-

posited her tray and grumbled, "If you didn't let that slut spend your hard-earned money on that beggarly Hiraga family, you'd have proper clothes for a man of your standing."

Saemon hissed, "Stop your babbling, woman! Your foolish chatter offends our guest."

The woman drew herself up sharply. Angry color suffused her face, and the resemblance to her brother was startling. "Foolish am I? All day and night I work and worry and that is what I get? I take care of your house, your clothes, your meals like a servant. I keep an eye on that whore you brought into our home, who spends your money like water while we live like paupers. Hah! I hope she bought that sword to slit your throat some night."

"Out!" Saemon was up, pointing a shaking finger at the door. His sister tossed her head and left. He followed her, saying over his shoulder, "I made the mistake of marrying a former courtesan. It has upset my household. I shall return in a moment."

The walls were thin, and again Akitada could hear angry shouting from the back of the house. He took his flute from his sleeve and looked at it thoughtfully. There were sounds of a scuffle and a woman's cries, abruptly stifled. Saemon re-

turned, breathing heavily, and sat back down.

Akitada said, "You performed the autopsies. May I ask what you found?"

"Kiyomura was stabbed repeatedly. At least two thrusts went straight to his heart. The beggar died of an apoplexy possibly brought on by witnessing the murder."

"Ingenious."

Saemon blustered, "I don't think I like your tone. What are you suggesting? And what did you mean by saying I had the best motive."

"The powerful motive of jealousy, although in your case envy, pride, and money enter into it, too. You are an ordinary, hardworking man who toiled and saved for many years to buy the love of a beautiful woman. Then Kiyomura, by all accounts an obnoxious wastrel and womanizer, arrives on the scene and not only beds your wife but allows her to support his luxurious lifestyle."

"That's a lie," cried Saemon.

"Ah. Is it? Kiyomura was particularly liberal with money last night, wasn't he? And he enjoyed cruel taunts. He talked about an admirer and bragged that he had found a gold mine, and when he looked at you, you realized suddenly that you had been subsidizing him all along. Perhaps Hiraga's presence re-

minded you of his wife's visit to your house. You knew Hiraga thought you unworthy of one of his swords; his wife sold the weapon without her husband's permission because a large family of hungry children requires more income than a swordsmith with such exacting standards in his customers can supply. It must have rankled also that your money went towards the support of Hiraga's family. In any case, the quarrel between Hiraga and Kiyomura gave you an idea of the perfect revenge. You rushed home for the sword your wife had purchased—out of compassion for Mrs. Hiraga, I suspect, although you assumed it was for her lover—and you ambushed the drunken Kiyomura, hoping to cast suspicion on Hiraga."

A slow breath escaped from Saemon's lips. His right hand crept to his sash, and his eyes stared fixedly into Akitada's. Exploding into sudden movement, he flung himself forward. Something flashed in his raised hand. Akitada twisted out of the way and brought his flute down sharply on Saemon's wrist. There was a crack, a cry of pain, and Akitada pinioned the pharmacist to the floor, twisting his arm behind his back.

The door opened abruptly.

"Ah, just in time, inspector," said Akitada, looking up from

Saemon's back. "Here is your killer. I was wondering how to proceed. You must have the power of divination."

The inspector gestured to two constables, who quickly tied the dazed Saemon with the thin chains they wore around their middle. Saemon's wife, disheveled, one eye blackened, and bruises covering her pale face, came in slowly. She did not look at her husband. Her eyes were on Akitada.

"Thank heaven you are all right, sir," she murmured from swollen lips. "I hurried as much as I could."

The inspector said, "She has accused her husband of Kiyomura's murder and identified the sword as one she purchased recently. It seems Kiyomura was her lover."

Saemon jerked on his chains and spat. "Demon!" he cried, his face distorted with fury. "Whore! It's all part of the plot. I'm charging her, inspector! She killed the bastard herself because she found a noble lover." He jerked his chin towards Akitada. "Yes! I caught them at their filthy game! They're in it together, trying to get rid of me now!"

Akitada was as dumbfounded by the accusation as everyone else. Not so Saemon's sister, who burst in, crying, "It's the truth. She was a whore before

he married her, and she sleeps with every man who will have her still. I knew at once what this . . . this person—" she pointed at Akitada "—had in mind when he came. He made sure Saemon was gone and then asked for her. But I sent for my brother. He came at once and we found them . . . doing it, right there, on the floor of her husband's house. Slut!"

The inspector's eyes went to Saemon's wife, took in the bruises and the tearful look she gave Akitada, and asked, "Is that why your husband beat you?"

"Of course it is," cried the sister. "Only a saint could have restrained himself."

Saemon's wife did the worst thing she could possibly do. She ran to Akitada, knelt, and pressed his hand to her cheek. "Forgive me," she sobbed. "I did not wish to cause you trouble. I would gladly die to undo this evil thing."

Akitada saw suspicion in the inspector's eyes and satisfaction in her husband's. The man was as slippery as an eel and about to escape the net. Worse, Akitada's reputation, already damaged by his eccentric pursuits, would not survive this tale of sexual misconduct leading to a false murder charge laid against a solid citizen.

As he considered his situation, he knew that the inspector, too,

was put to a test. If he threw in his lot with Akitada, his punishment for a miscarriage of justice could be exile. And what about Tora?

After an uncomfortable silence, the inspector walked to Saemon and bent to untie his chains. Saemon's lip twitched. His wife released Akitada's hand with a small cry of despair and ran from the room.

"You are making a mistake," Akitada said. "This man has killed twice, for the other body you found is his second victim, not a beggar but an innocent passerby who must have happened upon a murder scene before the killer could wash the bloodstains off himself."

"Even an idiot could see there were no wounds on the beggar. How was he killed?" shouted Saemon.

Akitada walked to the wall and bent to pick up a slender steel needle. "This," he said, extending the needle to the inspector, "is the weapon that man tried to use against me before your arrival, and he used the same method to eliminate the witness to his crime. That is why I suggested a careful post-mortem. Even if you do not find the needle, you will find blood in the man's ear or nose." He turned to Saemon. "You may not know how to use a sword, but you are a skilled acupuncturist

with medical training. Not only are the tools of your trade always with you in that satchel you carry, but you know how to inflict a fatal wound, whether it is a sword cut to the heart or a needle puncture through an ear or nostril to the brain."

"You will find no needle," cried Saemon, "and bleeding from nose and ears is common in cases of strokes."

The inspector looked from the needle in his hand to Saemon and the chain that still lay at the pharmacist's feet. Before Saemon could speak, his sister shouted, "Besides, anyone can use those needles. It means nothing. He returned early last night. I can testify to that."

"You cannot," said Saemon's wife from the door. All eyes went to her. She was very pale except for the bruises, and she was clutching a brown-striped man's robe to her chest. "My husband left in a grey robe yesterday. I went to look for it and found this instead."

The inspector snatched the robe from her hands and held it up. It was clearly too large for the thin Saemon.

"It is not his," Saemon's wife said unnecessarily. "I have never seen it before. What happened to your grey robe, husband?"

"It is in the hands of the police," said Akitada. "Your husband traded it for his second vic-

tim's robe. He tore it to make the dead man look like a vagrant, forgetting that beggars rarely wear clean white loincloths.

"Tie him up again!" snapped the inspector to his constables.

Saemon cursed, and his sister wailed, "Don't believe them! She's an evil woman! What kind of wife turns on her own husband? Tell me that!"

They ignored her. The constables led Saemon away, and the inspector said to Akitada, "A strange case. It will depend on identifying the second man, easily done of course, but . . . er . . . my apologies for your inconvenience. Your servant will be released immediately." He bowed and was gone.

Saemon's sister stood uncertainly for a moment. She looked at the younger woman. "You have no right here any more," she said venomously. "Get out of my house! If you're here when I return, I'll have you whipped through the streets for the adulteress you are." Then she ran after the police.

Saemon's wife looked stricken. "She is right," she said, wringing her hands. "I am a terrible wife. I betrayed my husband, again and again. Now he will die because of me. I know I am worthless. There is nothing to do but to die."

Akitada put his hand on her shoulder. "No," he said. "Life



thrusts difficult choices upon us. Your courage and sacrifice have saved my servant's life and given peace to the spirits of the murdered men. Such acts will not go unrewarded. You may stay in my home and count on me for money or any other help you desire."

She flushed and her eyes moistened. "Your home?" She shook her head with a sad smile. "You are very good, sir, but your ladies would not welcome someone like me. No, don't insist. It cannot be." She paused. "But if I might borrow travel funds? I would like to see my parents again. They are poor farmers. Perhaps I can atone . . ."

\*

The sun was setting. A refreshing wind blew from the western mountains, and here and there sere leaves drifted from the trees. The willows at the river had yellowed until their dancing branches looked like threads of golden silk against the brown brocade of the river. The heat had finally broken, but Akitada, who was walking towards the bridge, had a face full of gloom.

"Sir, sir!" Tora was running towards him, grinning broadly. "I knew you would do it . . ."

Akitada stopped. "I paid a heavy price," he said sadly, reaching into his sleeve and holding out his broken flute.

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FICTION

# The Piano Man

Lynn K. Miller



**T**he lake covered a lot of town junk. People dumped trash in it when Winklefoss wasn't looking. And when he was, they boated on it, courted, and got engaged. That lake was as much a part of us

as our church, and we took it for granted until Dwight decided to drain it. And that sent the whole town into an uproar.

"Dwight," I said. "Don't do this. You're destroying a landmark. Your parents fished on

that lake. Their parents skated on it."

His dad, old Abner, chimed in. "You're after money, boy. Pure and simple and it ain't gonna happen. No developer's gonna put houses over there."

His wife railed at him. "Dwight. You do this and I'll never speak to you again." And from my wife Sarah, "Where're you going to get the land to fill it?"

But Dwight did it anyway. Cut himself a deal with a developer over in Sandy Lake. Turned out his dad was right. The deal fell through later on, and all he got for his trouble was a mudhole full of mosquitoes.

Came the day he emptied the lake, half the adults and all the kids were camped on shore to watch. Bulldozers ripped away the earth dam, and water spilled into the creek. A couple of tractors, an old swatter, and half a boat sat on the bottom. And something else. A car sat thirty feet from the end of the boat ramp, a late thirties Ford.

The workmen hauled it on shore, scraped off the hood and the windows, and pried open the doors. Water gushed out. Sludge had settled over the interior, and a putrid stench billowed out.

A skeleton lay across the front seat, feet on the floorboards, rusted tools at its head. It was stripped of flesh. Only some fat-

ty tissue remained around bone and cartilage like dried cottage cheese.

I doubled over as though somebody'd hit me in the stomach with a sledgehammer.

"What's the matter, Ross?" Doc McBride asked. "You never saw a dead body before?" He, of course, had a handkerchief tied over his nose and an evil-smelling cigar in his hand.

"Maybe it's the stink. You preachers should become more acquainted with death in the flesh like we do. You talk about it enough. Might toughen you up a bit."

It wasn't the stench or the horror that got me. It was pure fear. The thing that I'd dreaded ever since Aunt Lizzie had told me her story was staring me in the face.

"Ross." Sarah bent over me, her arm around my shoulders. "Here. Suck on this Life Saver." But I waved her away and ran for the bushes.

I loved Sarah and our two boys, and I loved the life we'd made for ourselves in McCaullough's Corners. At our wedding we'd promised to tell each other everything. She read me her poetry, and I'd tell her tidbits about the parishioners. We'd been married sixteen years, and she'd never once in all that time let anything slip. She'd been tested and not found

wanting. No doubt about it. Sarah could keep a secret.

But as I threw up last night's dinner, then started on yesterday's breakfast, I could never tell her about this, not now, not ever.

I'm a minister. At one time that surprised people. They expected a holier-than-thou type of guy, which I'm not. And I don't look like a minister.

All through school girls chased me. I let a few of them catch me until I met Sarah, who married me despite my handsome face.

"It's not good for a minister to be that gorgeous," she said. "You'll be running from female parishioners all your life. And the men'll never accept you. Go into something else."

But I became ordained, and she was right, the first pastoral call was tough. Too many hungry women.

"Who was it this time?" she'd say. Or, when I'd come home with a box of brownies, she'd pick up the phone. "Thank you for the brownies, Mrs. Jones. They were delicious. I must get your recipe." We'd laugh, and Mrs. Jones's face would be red for a few Sundays.

Then I heard about the opening in McCaullaugh's Corners. I'd spent summers here at Aunt Lizzie's. My mother, Myrna, and Lizzie were second cousins. I


loved this part of the world, and I wanted my family to get to know and love Aunt Lizzie the way I had. So when this pulpit opened up, I jumped at it. And after the first year the congregation forgot about my handsome face and accepted me as one of them. I was Lizzie's nephew, after all.

And to those people who asked, I gave Aunt Lizzie credit for my calling. She'd bought me books, introduced me to the secret places in the woods where the healing plants grew. She'd taught me about people and animals, ethics and prayer, both the seen and unseen things of this world.

She told me stories about Phoebe, the witch from Salem. She let me climb the spirit tree to collect oak moss for the poison she manufactured in her war against the insects that attacked her garden. And rain or shine, every Sunday we attended church, where she was the pianist.

She was the strangest and the most wonderful person I'd ever met, and I loved her.

Sarah and I had been in McCaullaugh's Corners eleven years when I started to worry. I'm enough of an oldtime Presbyterian to look over my shoulder when things are going too well. And sure enough, the gods stirred the pot, and my world



turned upside down right in front of me—the car and the body. And there was no way under God's green earth that I would ever let Aunt Lizzie get dragged through this. Minister or not, I'd do anything to protect her. She'd suffered enough.

The afternoon after we found the body was one for *National Geographic*. Red-gold trees arched over the road in front of our house. An Amish cart crested the hill. Sarah and the boys had packed an early supper for a hike in the woods, and although I wanted to go, I didn't. I had to get to Lizzie's. I took off through the back woods to Lizzie's house and planned how I'd get her out of town. I'd buy her a ticket to Costa Rica. No. I'd take her to my brother in Pittsburgh. Yes. Nobody knew him. She'd be safe.

I pulled up at the back door and twisted the knob. Locked. Doors are never locked in our town. I rummaged under a flowerpot, found a key, and let myself into the kitchen. I held my breath listening, then closed the door. Lavender and roses hung from the beams. Cinnamon scented the room. Plants and oak moss littered the counter, her insect poison in the making.

I helloed but got no answer. The big old house was quiet, on-

ly a clock ticked. The back of my neck crawled. Something was wrong, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

Trying to act natural, I whistled and clomped down the hall. I stuck my head in the parlor. A fortune in commodes and glass filled the room, inherited from her mother. Sun streamed through lace-curtained windows and shone on the portrait of Lizzie's great aunt Phoebe, the Puritan from Salem, smug in her lace collar, a velvet sofa and cherry coffee table beneath the picture.

I continued down the hall to the music room where Lizzie had taught piano to me and all the rest of the kids. Ferns flanked a baby grand piano that occupied the center of a Persian rug. Resisting the temptation to test the keys, I poked my head in the dining room and helloed up the stairs. But as I'd known the minute I walked in, Lizzie was gone.

Did she know already? Had somebody already told her? I pushed away the gnawing fear and concentrated on where she might be. Probably needed a plant or an herb for her insect poison. I could try the woods, but just as soon as I'd get one place, she'd be in another; it could turn into a wild goose chase.

I taped a note to the stove:

"They found the car. Don't worry. I'll come tomorrow."

The day after they exhumed the car, the inquest was held in the fire station, Doc McBride presiding.

He scrutinized each person as they came in. He knew the babies who came early and the ones who didn't come at all. Between the two of us and the sheriff, we knew everything about everyone in town.

All the curious and everybody concerned were finally inside and seated. Everybody but Aunt Lizzie. Doc McBride nodded to the stenographer at the end of the bingo table and set his coffee cup down. He folded his hands over his vest and looked over his glasses.

The crowd hushed.

"First off, this is not a trial," he began. "This is an inquest. And second, I don't care how long ago this crime was committed, justice will prevail. Always has. Always will."

"Now. The sheriff and I are prepared to take depositions about the car found at the bottom of Winklefoss's lake. Information, mind, not gossip. We're here to determine if death occurred as a result of natural or unnatural causes. In other words, was it accident, suicide, or homicide? M.E. in Pittsburgh says homicide."

People shuffled their feet and mumbled to their neighbors.

"That's what we have so far." Doc McBride chewed his mustache and adjusted his glasses. "We're waiting for a report on the teeth and the results of our little meeting here. But we could use a positive identification of the body from any of you if you feel so inclined."

The room fell silent. I'd purposely sat in the back, Sarah next to me. She glanced at me out of the corner of her eye. I didn't want to give anything away, not even to my wife. Everybody was watching everybody else, wondering who was going to say what, and I held my face neutral. Nobody knew my true relationship to Lizzie. All they knew was that I was her nephew and their minister, and I wanted to keep it that way.

McBride held up a typed form. "A man reported missing, a piano tuner from Greenville, July, 1939." A cold chill washed over me. I scanned the people's faces in front of me and grabbed Sarah's hand to fortify myself against what was to come.

McBride continued, his voice more gravelly than before. "Last seen," he scowled at the audience, "McCaullough's Corners." He ripped off his glasses, and people jabbered at their neighbors and yelled across the aisles.

The pulse pounded in my ears. There it was. Out in the open.

He banged a gavel on the table, and the room quieted. "As coroner of Mercer County, I declare this inquest open. Now, who'll be first?" He twirled his glasses and peered into the first three rows.

Blank faces stared back. Nobody raised a finger.

McBride rocked on his heels and crooked his thumbs in his vest pockets. "Appears to me we're missing a key witness here today. And the rest of you are unaccountably taken with a dose of the shys. So Ellyda McCaullaugh, I'll call on you to get us started."

I edged forward on my seat as Ellyda made her way down the aisle. Tall with a graceful walk, she was the town aristocrat, and I had her to thank for my call. She not only carried a lot of weight with the church officials, she *was* the church officials. And even though she was difficult to get to know, I liked her. I admired her no-nonsense approach to life, and I appreciated her humor.

She contributed generously to the maintenance of the beautiful old church. After all, Hamilton McCaullaugh's great-great-grandfather had built it in 1780 and was the first minister. Reverend Doctor Jacob McCaullaugh's soaring monument

commanded the center of the churchyard, the rest of the family around him, and theirs were the most lovingly tended plots in the churchyard.

I strained to hear McBride.

"Now, Ellyda. If memory serves, you were the first person to see the piano tuner when he came to town. That right?"

When she nodded, McBride polished his glasses on his tie and spoke into his shirt. "We need to get this on tape, so I'll ask you to voice your answers if you please, Ellyda. And when was that?"

"July, 1938. I remember the day. It was so hot you could hear the corn grow as Ham used to say." She flashed a weak smile at the audience, and the women nodded back sympathetically. Hamilton McCaullaugh had been dead since 1970.

"It was hot all summer. By afternoon the house was like an oven. We ate most of our meals out under the spirit tree. We had finished lunch that day when the piano tuner pulled into the drive. He fixed our piano, and I sent him on to Lizzie's."

"And that was the last time you saw him?"

"Once again in the church the next summer when I brought in the Sunday flowers. But that was the last time."

As Ellyda finished, Edna



Clawson barreled up the aisle. She tugged her dress over her hips, rapping one old fellow on the side of the head with her purse. My nerves strung to the breaking point, I laughed. It turned into a cough with a timely dig in the side from Sarah, bless her. She's saved me more than once.

"You have some information for this inquest, I take it, Edna." Detecting a smudge that needed his attention, McBride huffed on his glasses. He used those glasses more as a prop than an aid to his vision.

"I saw him drive up in that fancy car, brand new Ford it was and black. Oh, he caught your eye, all right. Right handsome, he was. I expected a hunched-over little old man. And out pops Clark Gable. You could've knocked me over with a feather."

"Yes, ma'am. You saw him go into Lizzie's house?"

"Put a sport coat on before he knocked on her door. My, it was close; it was so humid my keys stuck. Black wavy hair he had. And polished shoes. I like that in a man, the shoes I mean. I may be a widow lady, but I'm not dead."

The audience tittered, and McBride glared them quiet.

"I called and told Lizzie to send him over when he finished. He didn't come for the longest

time. I mind I got a run in my hose and worried that he'd ring the bell and I'd be undressed. It was so hot, you know; and I just sat for a while fanning myself and cooling off. I kept my eye on Lizzie's house so I could hurry and get dressed when I saw him comin'. But nothin' was stirrin' over there."

"So he was in her house two hours?"

"Umm. And then he came to my house. I asked him where he was from, told him about my family and Ed's accident at the grain elevator. Took him short of an hour. And I wondered how come after he'd spent so much time on Lizzie's."

"Thank you, Edna." McBride bent to help her up. But she settled her purse more firmly against her stomach.

"But he came back. She must've invited him 'cause around dusk I went out to check on my flowers. The wind was coming up something fierce. Lizzie's windows and curtains were closed tighter'n a drum. Odd in that heat, I said to myself. I heard piano music and voices comin' from over there. I figured it was him, so I took a little walk down the street and sure enough, that Ford was parked around the corner behind Strausser's store."

"And what time did he leave?"

"Leave? He didn't leave. He

stayed till morning." Edna smirked, and my jaw dropped. Cold fear washed over me. I froze in my seat. It was out.

If McBride's glare had been steel, it would've skewered Edna Clawson. "You're sure about that?"

"Next morning I got up real early. The curtains were closed, and his car was still there. I was upset, I can tell you. I was so upset I called Reverend Guthrie."

"Seems like you have a mighty fine memory for something that happened forty years ago. Could it be you're making some of this up, now?" Doc McBride asked.

Edna smirked again. "I've kept a diary ever since I got married, over fifty years now, every day. I just read that part again this morning."

"Thank you, Mrs. Clawson," and McBride stood up.

But the Edna Clawson I knew would not be put off, and her next words recoiled inside me like gunshots. "People have to watch out for one another. Now, you take Lizzie. Her mother got herself in trouble with that coal miner and had to get married. It killed her family. Just killed them. She ruined her life, and you all know it. And what's more, that sort of thing runs in the blood. Always has. Like mother, like daughter." Her eyes swiveled around the room. But

no one met her glance, and she heaved herself out of the chair.

Poor dear deluded Lizzie. My heart ached for her.

I remember the afternoon she told me her story as though it were yesterday. I'd been in McCaullough's Corners several weeks, but of course Aunt Lizzie hadn't been in worship. I made my first official call on her.

Aunt Lizzie was flustered, fidgety. "I have to tell you something," she said. "Something that happened a long time ago." Then she fell silent, her eyes on the clenched hands in her lap.

We sat in the parlor, she on the couch beneath the portrait of the witch from Salem and I across from her. Outside, rain dribbled down the casement windows. As I admired the artistry of the portrait, teacup in hand, the sun broke through the clouds, projecting the shadows of raindrops onto the canvas. It looked as though tears were running down Phoebe's face. It startled me, and it took me a minute to sort out the phenomenon. When I looked again, the portrait was normal. I dismissed it from my mind, intent on getting Aunt Lizzie to open up.

I began by telling her what I knew from family stories passed on to me. Forty years ago she'd left town, unheard of for her. First, she missed Harvest Home,

and second, she just up and went visiting, something she'd never done before. So whatever had happened, I told her, must have happened around that time. And I was going to sit here in her parlor until she told me.

Harvest Home Festival is a blend of Iroquois, old Scots, and Celtic traditions. The more conservative Christians among us complain, but I ignore them. We decorate the church with vines and pumpkins. We judge jellies and quilts, bob for apples, sell crafts, light a bonfire—a week of fun culminating in the Halloween party. These days tourists attend. But that year, the year of the piano man, the whole town was there all right, everybody except Lizzie.

"Oh, Ross," she told me. "I can't do it. I can't tell you. You especially, and not after all these years."

"And that's just why you *are* going to tell me. That's a long time to be away from the church. Too long. You loved this church. We went every Sunday when I was little."

"Forget I'm your nephew. I'm your pastor now, and I'm going to get to the bottom of this. It doesn't matter what you've done. How bad it is. Nothing can ever lessen my love for you. And as for God, He loves you yesterday, today, and tomorrow, no matter what."

She sobbed, and used to these soul-cleansings, I slid on to the couch next to her, prepared to offer handkerchiefs, my shoulder, prayer, tea, whatever it took to dredge up the pain and resolve the misdeeds that lay underneath. But no amount of pastoring could have prepared me for what I heard that day in Aunt Lizzie's parlor. And as we uncovered her story, I fell apart, and she became the comforter.

"No, I didn't go to Harvest Home," she began. "I went to Ohio to visit Myrna. I told everybody she needed help with the kids. But you know people in this town. Somebody knew somebody who knew somebody."

"Six years later it was Decoration Day and I was taking peonies to put on the graves. Reverend Guthrie met me in the churchyard and asked me to stop by his office to see him. He was waiting for me, he and four elders."

"They wanted me to go before the session and confess. Public repentance they called it. I didn't have to go before the congregation, they said, just the session. They'd do that much."

"I couldn't. I just couldn't. It was all so awful, like a bad dream, like it had happened to somebody else. I've never talked about it to anyone. I couldn't."

Lizzie had given birth to a ba-

by boy, and Myrna had adopted it. And that baby had been me.

She broke down, and I made more tea. She sipped and cried. Then I sipped and cried.

Elizabeth Stapleton Dight had been stricken from the roles of McCaullaugh's Corners Presbyterian church. Nobody outside Reverend Guthrie and the four elders ever knew why. Her secret had been kept. But that secret sent me into a personal tailspin and a conspiracy of silence that I struggle with to this very day.

The summer of '39, according to Lizzie, the piano man came back to town. He tuned the church piano and several more around town. He went to Lizzie's house for dinner. And that was the last time anybody saw him.

"I invited him for dinner," she told me. "I'd been at it all day—fresh corn from the garden, potatoes and peas and a roast in the oven. I ironed up my mother's Irish linen tablecloth. Cut my prize Peace roses.

"I got out pictures of the baby, you. I showed him my wedding dress I planned to wear after he'd left his wife, after the divorce, and told him how the year had dragged by; I never thought it would end. Every day I went through the motions of living, and every night I dreamed of us together as a family. I asked to

see his divorce decree as he'd promised. And you know what he did? He laughed. I was stunned. Destroyed. I couldn't believe it.

"I'll never get a divorce," he said. "You must have misunderstood me. Women are always misunderstanding me."

"And then I realized that he must have done this to hundreds of women." Lizzie's face grew still. She closed her eyes before she could go on. My own heart had quit beating long before. My brain was in shock.

"He had nerve," she went on. "He leaned back in his chair and grinned at me. He was so handsome, and I must have looked a sight with my mouth open like that. He asked me if he should leave.

"And then I knew what I had to do. I shut my mouth and smiled.

"Dinner's ready," I told him. "I'd just have to throw it out, so you might as well eat it." I served him the corn. I passed the peas. I didn't have any, couldn't. I went out to the kitchen and mixed my oak moss poison into the gravy and ladled it over his roast beef. He had two helpings.

"I dumped his body in his car and drove to the dam. I got the car rolling down the ramp. I planned to drown myself with him, but at the last moment I

jumped out. I couldn't do it. I couldn't leave you."

I was stunned. This proper, whitehaired lady was telling me she'd murdered someone. And not only that, she'd had an illegitimate baby. This wasn't some stranger telling me this, this was my aunt, my mother. I was horrified. But I understood.

I admired her courage. She did things I wouldn't have the guts to do. She loved the wrong man. She had a baby alone and in secret. She rid the world of a man who preyed on women, a man who destroyed lives. That's murder, I know, but not to a woman. A woman can do that, flick the fly out of the cream and go on as though nothing had happened. Not men. They could never pull it off.

Or maybe I admired her because she did it for me. Instead of taking the easier way out, she'd opted for the harder road. She'd chosen to stay alone and an outcast because someone needed her. Would I do as much? Would any of us?

I knew right then and there that Lizzie had to be reinstated in the church. I met with the elders, and I convinced them that thirty years' excommunication was long enough. Then, after more tears and a long philosophical discussion on what religion was all about, I asked her to come back.

The next Sunday she marched into the sanctuary and sat down at the piano. She opened the hymnal to "Amazing Grace." The congregation stumbled to its feet, shocked. We straggled through the first stanzas. But by the time we hit the third verse, we were into it. We rattled the windows. We shook the rafters. That old church hasn't praised the Lord as loud or as long before or since.

There wasn't a dry eye in the house. But not a tear disgraced Aunt Lizzie. She raced the choir (who could barely sing) through the anthem, just like before. She pounded out the hymns. Forgotten were the painful years alone. I might as well have been Lot's wife up there in the pulpit that day. I was eloquence itself. And nobody heard a word I said.

She became a pillar of the community. She taught piano to the granddaughters of the elders. She chaired the Women's Association and presided over the Garden Club.

The night of the inquest I was slumped in my study, my head in my hands, when the phone rang. I ignored it; I didn't want to talk to a soul. But the phone wouldn't quit. Finally, on the eleventh ring, I snatched up the receiver. It was Sheriff Boyd.

"Just got word from Harris-

burg," he told me. "You'll never believe it."

"Try me," I said.

"A week before the piano man came here he'd been charged with bigamy."

"Holy smoke," I said, my mind racing.

Boyd's voice came over slow and deliberate. "And. Wait till you hear this."

"I'm waiting," I said.

"A Miss Dyer places the piano man in Sharon five days after McCaullaugh's Corners. And. A lady from Greenville saw him two weeks after that."

I shrieked into the phone. "You're kidding."

"Got it right here in black and white, old buddy."

I slammed down the receiver and raced over to Lizzie's to tell her everything was all right, everything was fine. The calls probably had to do with bigamy, other women victimized. I didn't know, and I didn't care. All I knew was, thank God, she was in the clear—thank you, Jesus and all the angels in heaven. And I couldn't wait to tell her. Couldn't wait to celebrate.

I charged through the back door and into the kitchen. Exhilaration surged through me. Joy. I laughed. I shouted. But the joy died in my chest.

The scent of cinnamon filled the kitchen and something more. Something noxious, bit-

ter. Something burned. Over there on the stove. I grabbed the pot and threw it in the sink. Oak moss. It was the oak moss poison. Fear sucked the moisture from my mouth.

I raced down the hall and into the parlor, afraid yet knowing what I'd find: A Bible lay face up on the coffee table. Sun streamed through the lace curtains and shone on Phoebe's portrait. Beneath the picture, on the sofa, lay Elizabeth Stapleton Dight.

She was buried in the churchyard beside her mother, and I conducted her funeral. The whole town was there, even Doc McBride, who never attended anybody's funeral.

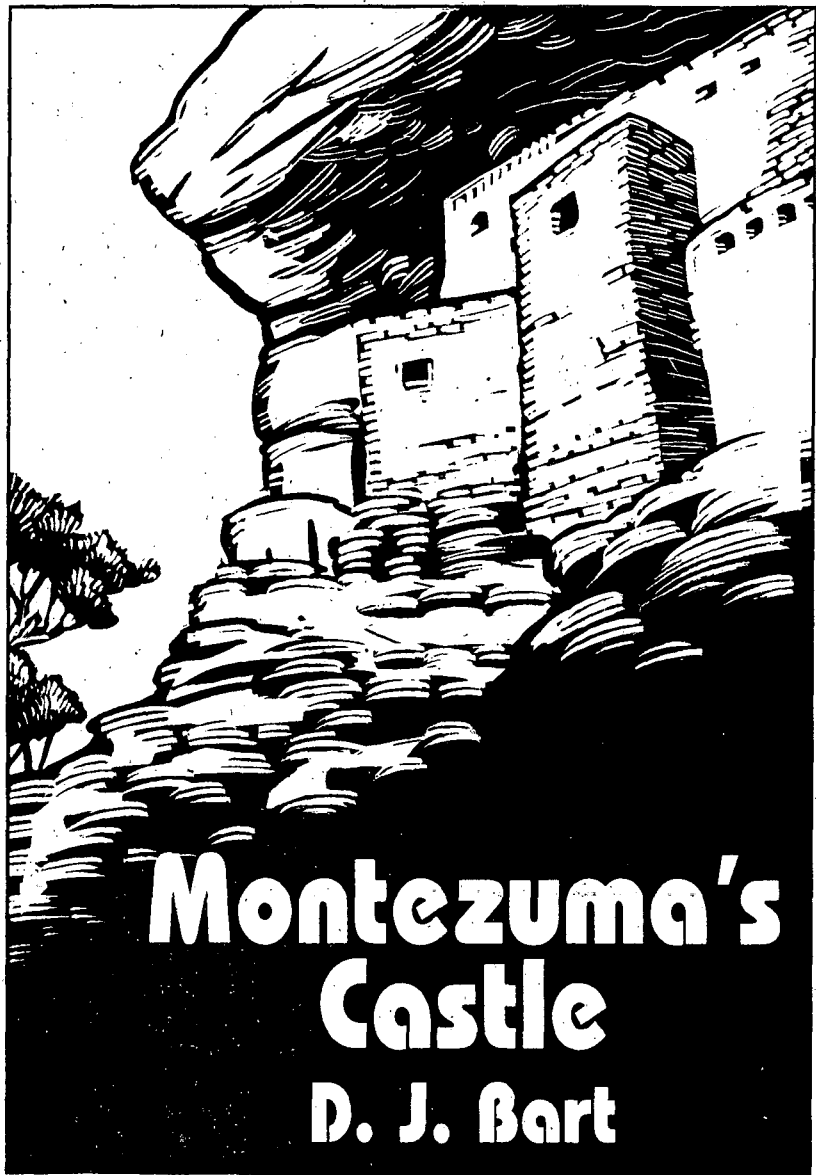
Last to leave, he joined me at the edge of the graveyard, contemplating the tops of the trees that rippled in the wind.

"She was an exceptional woman, McFerrin." McBride reached into his vest and pulled out two cigars, offering me one. I shook my head no.

He selected one, bit off the end, scratched a match, and lit it. He pulled on it several times until it got going to his liking.

He examined the ash, settled the business end inside his cheek, then resumed his contemplation of the trees. "Any man would be proud to have her as his mother." □

FICTION



# Montezuma's Castle

D. J. Bart

*Illustration by Tim Foley*

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**D**etective Merak had phoned earlier, so I already knew what was waiting for me at the national monument. I mean besides him. And since the people in the gravel parking area seemed reasonably alive, I figured none of them to be the victim, at least not of a homicide.

A scruffy-looking tourist kid wearing a suspiciously covetous expression meandered around the cars and motor homes while I parked next to what was presumably the rest of his family: a man and wife and two adolescent kids, one of each gender. The four of them were devouring, with a predatory intensity, the fast-food lunch spread out on the tailgate of their beatup Pontiac station wagon.

This scene evoked the theme song from *The Beverly Hillbillies*, the damnable jingle repetitively heehawing through my head—I had to concentrate on something to shut it off. Staring at their license plate, I pondered the social significance of an Oklahoma family picnicking in near proximity to a murder scene.

I got out of my zebra-striped Range Rover and looked up the dry, barren hill toward the unseen cliff dwelling on the far side. Swaying in the desert breeze, a strip of yellow homicide tape was stretched across

the path leading up to the monument between a couple of gnarled, stubby piñon trees.

The tourist kid was reading the sign on my Rover as I started up the trail: RED ROCK ROVERS SIGHTSEEING TOURS. I have six Range Rovers painted like giraffes and zebras—a small business eliciting awe in tourists by flaunting the various landmarks and rock formations around my little hunk of northern Arizona. And they actually pay me.

“So, Merak, you got anything?” I asked the Coconino County sheriff’s detective as I joined him near the top of the trail.

“To quote Dr. Watson, Devin, I ain’t got a bloody clue.”

“Did Watson say that? I thought he just said things like ‘elementary.’”

“That was Holmes,” he said, shaking his head. “No wonder you gave up the trade.”

“Whoa, there, hoss. I’m a sensitive, nineties kind of guy willing to express my feelings, and that hurt.”

The detective tilted his head forward and stared, then shrugged. He could convey at least a dozen moods by merely dipping one shoulder or the other. Or both. Now he was in a rigid double-shoulder mood—time to get down to business.

He’s telling me about Montezuma’s Castle. There are five

stories and twenty rooms, which is why they call it a castle, but why Montezuma's Castle is probably only known to the pundit who came up with the name. The dwelling is built into a huge cliff cave away from the elements and is almost completely intact even after nearly a millennium.

At present it seemed that only one of the rooms was occupied, by a prone male, forty-one years old. Nodding toward the monument, I asked, "How was he killed?"

Merak pushed out the thin edges of his mouth to the point where they almost resembled lips and took a prodigious breath through a nose sharp enough to whittle mesquite.

"The victim succumbed to a massive cerebral hemorrhage caused by the sudden and forceful entry into his skull of a nine millimeter steel-jacketed bullet."

"What'd you do, read a book?"

Pulling out the big ugly Glock he wore at the small of his back, he said, "Nine millimeter, just like this."

"That a confession?"

"This little roscoe's the choice of drug dealers and grade school kids everywhere."

"And cops are tired of giving away the edge, eh?"

He nodded wearily, put the high-tech plastic cannon away,

and started up the rugged stairs carved out of the hillside. "C'mon, hotshot, see if you can spot something my nineteen years' experience and superior intelligence might've missed."

I glanced toward my Rover down in the parking lot, feeling an embarrassing compulsion to get my Browning .380 out of the glove box and brandish it around a while.

But I said, "The hotshot label—that some kind of back door compliment?"

"Hoping for some of your dumb luck is all," he said.

I was about to mention my sensitivity again when I noticed, below us, the same tourist kid hanging around my vehicle. I stopped and cupped my hands around my mouth. "Hey, kid, would you watch for me and make sure none of the diamond-backs inside get out that open window?"

He almost fell over the log barrier as he scrambled backward, away from the four-wheeler.

"Not nice to lie to the tourists, Devin. What would the Chamber of Commerce think?" Merak said as I joined him at the first of the ancient rooms.

"They'd have me tarred and feathered, whipped, hanged, and quartered and my body parts mailed to Borneo."

"And that's a bad thing,

right?" he asked, grinning. Then he sighed, the grin melting away as he bent forward at the waist to get into the tiny room.

With some difficulty I followed him inside. My knees are prone to rigidity, especially when I'm tense, the result of an injury and too many close calls when I'd been a P.I. down in the Phoenix area. "Avoid stress," the doc had told me; "lead a normal, healthful life."

If you look up "normal" in the dictionary, and I never have, I'll bet that one definition is "boring." My solution was to seine the mundane stream of life as a part-time P.I., looking for the occasional buoy of excitement while quietly pursuing a full-time line of work that is virtually stress free: tour operator.

"I don't know him," I said softly. It's difficult to recognize anyone with just half a face to go by; I grimaced as my gaze lifted to the gory wall above him that previously had only displayed a few faded petroglyphs.

"The coroner thinks the bullet exited just below the zygomatic arch," Merak said tightly, gesturing toward the wall.

"Damn," I said, thinking that "exited" was a major understatement; more accurately, exploded just below the whatchamacallit. And I found myself staring at a dark, iridescent patch on the wall.

"The evil that men do . . ." the detective quoted as I watched the shimmering patch move a little.

Flies. Christ.

"You all right?" Merak asked outside the room, standing next to me as I'm bending forward in the classic getting-ready-to-heave position.

I made a mental note in my ongoing essay on P.I. do's and don'ts. Don't eat breakfast burritos with salsa and green chile right before going to the scene of a homicide.

"No, I'm not all right," I told him, straightening, nodding toward the room. "That reminds me of how goddamn primitive our species really is, despite all the crap we try to do to elevate ourselves."

"You sound like a cop."

"Well, I was a P.I.," I said, taking slow, deep breaths, trying to get the queasiness to subside.

"Boy, I try to compliment you, and you insist on tearing yourself down," Merak said.

I gave him one of my famous looks. Well, not famous maybe, but definitely a look; of course being sickly pale probably lessened its impact.

"So, P.I., you got any ideas?"

"Yeah, I have an idea, Merak. Whoever did this is either supremely arrogant or crazier than Stalin's ghost."

Merak's bushy eyebrows

arched like skinny black caterpillars on a hot griddle.

Across the tiny canyon below us a thicket of willows turning yellow under the threat of autumn trembled in the light breeze, casting filigreed shadows on the surface of a clear pool of rain water. The natural scene presented a profound contrast to the ugly carnage inside.

"He did this in a place where the body would surely be found," I explained. "More important, though—" I paused for effect "—he left the shell casing behind."

Merak squinted at me as though I'd just said something suggestive about his mother, then ducked inside the death room—though not enough—scraping the crown of his head on the low lintel, hissing, "Dammit!"

Ours is a love-hate relationship; he loves being a cop and hates it when I find something he's missed.

After a half minute's worth of searching, "Where?" echoed out to me.

"In that long crevice in the south wall. Stuck in there like it's on display or some damn thing."

Actually it wasn't all that obvious. And it took a while for him to find it, mostly, though, because Merak wouldn't know which was the south wall if it had a big S on it.

Then he's coming out with the bright casing on the end of a pen. "Why the hell would he put it right there to be found?" he asked, slipping the brass cylinder into a clear plastic evidence bag.

"Cat and mouse?"

The detective lit up one of those little cigars he always carried that after ten minutes' chewing resembled something a small animal might leave behind. A wispy, curling rope of purplish smoke rose into the high desert air.

"Why'm I here?" I asked.

"Per diem, your old rate. And expenses, if verifiable. I'll get you his record, fax it to you."

Squinting, I asked, "Why do you want me in on an official one, Merak?" Wondering how he knew the victim had a record.

"'Cause I gotta get this one nailed. It'll hit the big papers, TV in Tucson and Phoenix, and it won't go away. You know people who know people, and it could save time."

The two-day rule. Homicides that weren't solved within forty-eight hours were often never solved. Nothing cools faster than a killer's trail.

I also knew that Merak had to have another reason for putting me on the payroll. "And?"

His look communicated a mild sorrow mixed with an

anger that appeared a few degrees hotter than his usual low simmer. "That guy in there is a cop. Just transferred up here from Tucson a couple of months ago."

A cop. So not a felony record, a service record.

"You'll have to fax it here," I said, jotting the number of the Eclectic Eel's machine on one of my Rovers business cards.

Merak looked at me like I was a Neanderthal.

I protested, "Hey, what do I need with another gadget? I still have payments on the damn computer."

Maybe delirious, maybe just tired, I pictured some Chinese farmer wearing a wide-rimmed straw hat even though the sun had long deserted his part of the world, trudging through a moonlit rice paddy behind a lumbering ox, cool soothing mud between his toes.

Between my toes, however, was only hot, dry, red dirt. And, instead of a cool night beneath the faint light of the moon, I'm sweating under a blazing sun—and sticking out of the middle toe on my right foot, suddenly, is the spine of a cactus. I responded appropriately with a howl, scaring up a jackrabbit who left my vicinity in great bounds, holding its disproportionate ears

up in the air as though flipping me the double bird.

Hare today, gone tomorr—

Anyway, I hunkered down and pulled the spine out of my toe, cursing the cactus in a verbal collage of languages; mostly English, the richest in profanity.

What am I doing barefoot in the desert outside Sedona, you ask? Well, not just barefoot, I'm bare everything—not even a Band-aid to protect a few square inches of skin.

When one of my Rovers came over the hill, the tourists aboard must have thought they'd just spied their first giant desert lobster.

Chip, one of my tour drivers, was grinning so hard I thought I heard his mouth ripping. He's asking, "Hey, Will! Getting a tan?"

Cute. He could just whistle for a Christmas bonus.

Then followed the clicking of cameras and marginally sincere you-poor-dears from a couple of whitehaired women who averted their eyes much too infrequently before I had the blanket wrapped around me.

"Does it hurt, hon?" one of them asked, patting my bare pink knee.

"Especially right there," I told her, getting a measure of satisfaction at watching her jerk back her hand.

Back in Sedona at my office,

under a couple of inches of soothing aloe vera gel and wearing just a worn, thin pair of white running shorts, I glared at a gloating Merak.

Gloating and chuckling. "She just left you out there?" he asked for the fifth or sixth time.

Paula Contreras, manager of the Eclectic Eel Gift Gallery and Cafe across the street, had gotten upset at my admittedly insensitive response to her inquiry as to whether marriage was in our future. I'm not going to repeat my answer, but in retrospect I'd have to say that she was well within her rights; I mean, feigning passion until I was *au naturel*, then speeding off in the Range Rover with my clothes. Leaving me, of course, clear on the other side of Coyote Rock, which is about fifteen miles from anywhere even remotely resembling civilization.

I'd gone there with her to try to clear my mind of the case after ten hours of heavy duty sleuthing. We go there often for private daytime skinny-dipping in the spring-fed natural bathing pool, a shallow depression in the large red rock shelf below Coyote Rock. During nighttime forays we've been known to approximate the howls of the very animal for which the rock is named while—well, let's just say that out there in the stark wilderness the primal side

of a person can more easily find expression.

"You've really got a way with women," Merak observed, a bright grin contorting his normally Easter Islandish features.

"Why is it cops always think they're funny and they never are?"

Merak chuckled. He walked to the window and looked across the highway that bisected Sedona, gazing toward a giggling gaggle of scantily attired, arrestingly mature teenage tourists. "So, you find out anything about Samuelson?"

The dead cop at Montezuma's Castle. "Same official stuff you know about, plus that he was investigating the mob's connection with the reservation's plans to open casinos."

"Mob's connection?"

I shrugged. "I didn't say there actually is one—he was looking into some reports from informants, apparently on his own time."

Eyes closed, Merak did something with his mouth that resulted in a lot of deepened wrinkles, presumably an indication of ongoing thought processes. "Informants, huh? From the rez or Anglos?"

"The rez."

"Max tell you this?" Merak asked. And I could hear the change in his voice. A careful

tone had replaced the less-than-subtle demand implicit in about everything he said. He knew that Max was one of the few things in life I took seriously.

"Yeah," I replied.

Max Trepah lived on the Hopi reservation. He would never say, but I figured him to be in his seventies, though in crises he had the alacrity of someone about thirty. And he was my best friend. Hell, probably my only real friend. His somewhat plump granddaughter Cara lived with him there. A great gal except for her continual urging that I should ingest some of her fry bread.

"Well," Merak said, turning toward the door, "I gotta go down to Tucson and interview his old squad and some relatives. Be back tomorrow sometime."

"I'll be here," I said, looking down at my pink body. Then remembering, "Max is checking with some of the tribal elders about those rumors."

Merak nodded and was gone, leaving me to my sore, itching hide. So much for the two-day rule, and I'd have to work by phone till I healed.

Three days later Max and I are heading along Sacred Mountain Road about twenty-five miles north of his tiny house on

the Third Mesa. Up until the end of last week I hadn't seen the old Indian for close to two months, but our friendship was of the kind to which such lapses are irrelevant.

My sunburn has diminished but still gets my attention in various places. And this irritation has seriously eroded any tact I might have possessed. "Merak said Cara's prints were on the casing, Max."

The old Indian turned a bronze, impassive face toward me. "Then granddaughter must've touched the casing. Doesn't mean she killed the man."

"I was merely commenting on their evidence against her, Max, not that I thought she did it."

They'd picked her up and printed her after finding her name in Samuelson's address book, a note in the margin listing her as an informant. Locked her up when the prints matched the ones on the shell casing.

"You know what she would have been talking about with Samuelson?" I asked.

Max squinted his already narrowed eyes as though peering into some other realm of existence.

"She was confused," he replied, scratching his forehead just below the red headband, long gray hair hanging to his shoulders. In profile, Max's nose looked like it



could give him alpha status in a gathering of eagles.

We turned onto the road leading up to Page. "About what?" I asked. "You mean the rumors of the mob butting into the proposed gambling casinos?"

His head did something resembling a shake. Apparently he didn't want to talk about Cara. So I tried something else. "Are the elders in bed with the mob now?"

His nostrils flared slightly. "No, but a couple of guys from Vegas talked with the tribal council—told them they wanted to make friends with them."

I raised my eyebrows. "And?"

"The council told them we had enough white friends already, in fact too many."

"What'd the mob guys say?"

"It's not what they said."

I glanced over, waited. Finally had to look back at the road just as he spoke.

"It's what they did. Burned up a family in their pickup near Black Snake Wells."

"Jesus. Are the Feds investigating?"

Max stared at me the way you might look at an obtuse but favorite child. "Hell, Devin, they're still pissed about Wounded Knee. But they said they'd get right on it, and that was back before Samuelson was found."

Bitterness was a tone I seldom heard in Max's voice. And since

I associate bitter with irrational, it was mildly unsettling. But after a few moments I was able to put it down to his concern over his granddaughter.

"He took me target shooting," Cara is telling me, her head in a bowed position, eyes tearing. Her long hair is braided into pigtails, two thick ropes of shimmering black. "I loaded the clips for his gun many times."

We were in the tiny jailhouse at the county substation in Page. Judging from the floor, they hadn't heard of brooms yet.

"You were an informant?"

Cara shook her head a little too urgently, as though eager to convince. "We were—friends."

Max spoke sharply to his granddaughter in their first language.

She bit her lip and sniffed, wiping at her eye with the back of a pudgy brown hand. "Lovers," she said to me with a steady gaze.

No way, I thought. His ex-squad buddies in Tucson had said Samuelson was a good-looking skirt chaser with a taste for slender blondes. Cara was an overweight, darkhaired Native American woman, and although she was a really nice girl, from what I'd heard about the dead cop nice wasn't what turned him on.

A long moment passed as I

tried to figure out some way to continue my line of questioning without hurting her. But I couldn't.

"Cara, Samuelson was working undercover on his own. Isn't it possible he used you to find out things?"

The sharp glance of a wounded predator fell on me, dark eyes staring.

"Did he ask you questions about gambling on the rez?"

She glanced at Max and then back to me. From her expression I could tell that even in that brief look something had passed between them. She nodded once, tears rolling down her plump brown cheeks.

"What did he ask you?"

"If I knew who might be on the side of the mob, in getting them into the casino if it's built."

"And you said . . ."

"I told him that none of our people would willingly bring them into it," she said, flipping a braid back over her shoulder, then touching her throat in an odd gesture of disorientation.

I'd noticed that she was acting strangely, hands moving constantly, nervously; each gesture followed by another, as though excusing the unconscious movement with more gesticulation. Experience told me that this was a person playing a part, but badly.

Max walked over to the win-

dow and looked out through the wire mesh toward the distant rim of the canyon bordering the far side of Lake Powell. He exhaled slowly through his mouth.

I too sighed before I spoke. "So if you loaded the clip, that's how your fingerprints got on the casing. That means he was killed with his own gun, since they didn't find it at his home. And it was a nine millimeter?"

She nodded.

Trying to show an insouciance I didn't feel, I leaned back, holding my palms up. "So the killer must've took it with him."

Neither Trepah responded. The grandfather's dark eyes followed the slow progress of a houseboat heading along the rock shoreline of the vast lake below. The granddaughter stared at her tensed hands resting on her thighs.

"You think it was a mob guy?" I asked Cara.

She just continued staring down at her pudgy, interlaced fingers, squeezing tightly as though holding onto something precious.

On the highway just north of Flagstaff, a maroon Lexus coupe whooshed around us heading south, a ground-hugging triumph of engineering, distinctive gold logo winking in the sunlight.

"I thought you told me you

were in the fast lane," Max observed without smiling.

"No, Max, I said that I live on the edge."

"Uh-huh."

The luxury coupe had already disappeared around a bend in the road, having devoured the long stretch of concrete ahead of us in what seemed like mere seconds.

The road wound its way through the low foothills. In the distance Humphrey Peak was ablaze, sporting golden aspens on its hulking shoulders. Here below, cloud shadows flew over the foothills around us, enlivening the landscape and creating an eerie, otherworldly feel.

Using my cellular, I left a message for Merak concerning what Cara had told me about the gun. When I'd asked her why she hadn't told the cops about loading Samuelson's clips, she had just glanced at Max and shrugged.

Alongside the highway ahead sat the dark red Lexus, hood up and a guy standing in the right lane waving his arms at us to stop.

"Do we look like Triple A?" I asked Max.

"You could run over him out here, and nobody would know," he said quietly but with enough sincerity in his tone to make me wonder for a second if he was kidding.

Pulling off onto the gravel shoulder, I noticed that the passenger door of the Lexus was ajar. Max was studying the guy on the road as though remembering his face.

"Trouble?" I asked as I got out of the Rover.

Max got out and walked to the front of the Lexus.

Without answering me, the guy who'd been waving approached Max from one side as a big man with slicked-backed dark hair got out of the passenger side, allowing the canted coupe to come back up to level. Going around to the front of the Lexus he asked, "You Trepah?"

Max looked at the huge man as if he were a nuisance on par with an insect. No nod. Nothing. Just looked right through him as if he were transparent instead of a huge side of beef in a shiny suit. It appeared to be an expensive silk suit, but it managed somehow to look tacky. The beef said, "We hear you're holding out on the vote."

"What is this?" I demanded, moving over to the Lexus. "You guys having trouble or just looking for it?"

The waving guy's reply was nonverbal, involving the pointing of a gun in my direction.

Max looked at me calmly. "You should have run over him."

"A smart ass Injun," the big

man said, reaching out and shoving Max so hard he had to scramble to maintain balance.

"Hey, jerkweed, back off," I blurted, moving toward the front of the car.

The guy with the gun decided the barrel belonged over my left ear and put it there via a brutal, flat arc. Humphrey Peak exploded, a volcano engulfing the hills, erupting into the clouds, and catching the sky on fire—a blazing red pyrotechnic sunset spiraling into deep, dark night . . .

"How many stitches?" Merak asked, bending close to look at my head. As if he could see anything—they'd taped a thick bandage above my ear.

I squinted at the detective, thinking he looked suspiciously pleased by my injury. "At least a couple of hundred. Happy? Hey, Merak, you gonna answer my question?"

"We let her out. The P.A. wants more evidence now in light of what you told us about her loading Samuelson's clips, which checks out, by the way—a guy at the shooting range. Anyway, we're starting to like those two hoods who roughed up you and Max."

"Roughed up? You've got a real way with understatement, you know that?"

Merak shrugged. "And you didn't get a tag number, right?"

"I told you, ace: Nevada, a couple of fours and a C. The rest of it and in what order—hey, I'm lucky my brains are still intact."

"How's the old man?"

"Says he's okay, but I think they hurt his shoulder a little, probably with some kind of schoolyard crap like twisting his arm behind his back. He wouldn't talk about it."

Merak gave a single approving nod. He liked Max.

We were in my apartment at the back of the tour office. I put my feet up on the coffee table. "You get anything down in Tucson?"

He sighed and started messing with his pants cuff, his leg crossed ankle over knee.

"Yes, Merak, that's a really interesting cuff—now, what'd you get?" I thought it must be really juicy to provoke this uncharacteristic fidgeting.

Slowly raising his head, he looked at me. "This is between us—agreed?"

I sloppily genuflected.

"Word has it Samuelson was for sale."

"A cop on the take?" I said, wide-eyed and obnoxious. "I s'pose next you'll be telling me there's no Easter bunny."

"There's no Easter bunny," Merak said flatly.

"So that's why you're liking those bums for the murder. You think maybe Samuelson got

greedy or tried something stupid like putting the squeeze on the boys?"

He got to his feet. "Keep in touch, Devin," and at the door he turned a little, looking across his shoulder. "And try to keep from getting the crap beat out of you for the next couple of days."

"That's at the top of my list."

A month later and everything seems to have just petered out. The investigation has stalled, and the casino vote has been put off till the following year.

And up in the high country winter impatiently waits for the last few leaves to fall.

"It's an open file on Samuelson, but from all they've learned, the guy was definitely dirty," I told Max. "Merak says they're thinking it was a mob hit. Guy at the range I.D'd Cara loading clips for Samuelson, which puts her prints innocently on the casing, so she's pretty much out of it."

Max and I are on the Third Mesa at one end of a high ridge; an ancient dolmen stands on the opposite end like a mini-Stonehenge, just as it has since long before even Max had walked this arid soil.

I said, "They haven't gotten a lead on those two hoods either. They're probably back in Vegas polishing their suits."

On the dusty flats below, look-

ing like a tiny Monopoly house, sat his two room dwelling. The hot, greasy smell of fry bread wafted up on the cooling breeze, and I could feel my stomach roiling.

Max said, "Samuelson started by putting pressure on the elders, telling them that mob involvement was inevitable."

Beneath the setting sun the desert had taken on a hazy coral hue. And around us were the stirrings of small creatures preparing to sleep away the night or to venture boldly out into it.

"Samuelson must've pissed off the boys, and when they made the hit on him, they used his gun, then buried it," I said.

The only thing I couldn't figure was why they'd left the shell casing in the crevice. Some kind of Mafia symbolism?

Max stared toward the northwest. Silence usually meant he didn't agree.

I sighed. "You know something different, cut the stoic act and give."

A fat, scaly lizard skittered out from the brush and canted its pointed head, rotating the nearest eye, scanning us for threat or appetite, and flicked away under a pile of rocks.

The old Indian never whispers, but this time he came close. "She liked him a lot, until—" He shrugged, raising his

voice a bit. "It had to be done," flipping his long hair back over his shoulder in an oddly effeminate way, the one gesture he had that betrayed an inner disturbance.

A strange feeling settled over me as if a malevolent presence of some kind had just shouldered its way between us, compelling me to glance nervously behind us toward the encroaching night.

Turning back I reluctantly scanned for . . . what's that word Paula's always using? Oh yeah, closure. So what's the scenario here?—Samuelson's death had been a message to the mob that the tribe had been pushed as far as they were going to allow, and Cara had been the messenger?

The crimson horizon seemed to be vibrating, a kind of visual hum, thin clouds stretched along the distant rim like strips of bloody gauze. I felt the scar above my ear, the hair growing back in but still bristly.

"But they didn't get the message, huh?" I said. "They threatened you that day on the highway about your vote on the casino."

He sat on the pile of rocks. "Samuelson was more an atonement than a message. But I guess a warning also."

This brought me around, staring at him. "What do you mean?" And in the back of my

mind the sense of dread turned into an image: a sardonic grin on a featureless face.

Max said, "Samuelson was seen with those goons at Black Snake Wells. He helped with the burning."

The old Indian was silent for a long time. Then as though finally remembering something he said, "But they didn't listen to the warning."

"Who?"

"The two with Samuelson who burned that family and then later beat us, they came back out here."

"What did they do?"

Max poked at a rock at his feet with the toe of his boot. "More threats."

And I'd thought it was all over.

I hunkered down next to the pile of rocks. "Have they been back since then?" Thinking I'd get Merak to light a fire under the Feds.

Max's dark eyes fell on me and I could almost feel his probing stare. Finally, just as the plaintive yelp of a coyote pup echoed out of a den in some distant arroyo, he said, "They never left."

I stood so abruptly I dislodged some stones. A couple of smaller ones rolled down the slope for a ways, the hollow sound echoing ominously in the red glow of near dusk.

And then I focused on the pile of rocks he was sitting upon. I blinked, and the edges of the rocks suddenly became clearly defined. I saw them with a clarity I could also feel, like a knife edge deep in the pit of my stomach.

The rocks had been placed there, and not by nature. By man. Recently.

After a long moment, "What if they send more?" I asked.

He gazed out over the mesa, his eyes slowly following the length of the vast horizon. "There's a lot of room out here," he said, the hint of a smile leavening his age-carved features, his skin glowing a burnished red in the dying light of the sunset.

"Uh, one thing, Max," I said. "Why did Cara leave the shell casing behind at the castle?"

He looked at me for a moment. "Didn't. She was never there."

"Then who . . ."

His impassive face turned away. "I put it there as a symbol, not knowing granddaughter's prints were on it."

"Why didn't you go to the Feds, Max?"

He allowed the semblance of a smile to return. "And sign a paper with them—it saying that they would protect the tribe from incursion?"

Yeah, right, another treaty.

So this pile of rocks with the

two hoods lying beneath it represented revenge. Just as the first killing at Montezuma's Castle had been retribution. And to give a warning, an unheeded warning.

Awed by the pure, primitive efficacy underlying those acts of violence, I heard my voice come out as little more than a croak. "But why do it there, at the cliff dwelling?"

"Power," Max replied, his own voice clear and strong: "That is one of the Old Places. I left a symbol of retribution, the shell casing, in homage to the ancients." His chin was tilted up, and his chest seemed full and proud as a young warrior's.

But with me a sense of the ridiculous is never too far away. I thought of him leaving evidence behind that could have put his granddaughter in jail, which then would have forced him to confess, and the dark humor of it evoked a deep chuckle.

He gave me a sharp glance. "What?"

Still chuckling, I said, "The power thing almost bit you in the ass."

He stared for a moment, then slapped his knee and whooped loudly. And we both laughed and laughed . . .

. . . until, through tearing eyes, the glistening plateau appeared as a landscape of running watercolors, and the ten-



sion of the past few weeks seemed to evaporate with the day's heat, rising from the timeless rocks of the mesa.

In the red glow from the sunset Max's laughing eyes shimmered like burning coals. And thinking of what he'd been willing to do for his tribe made me feel somehow impotent, wholly lacking in that kind of important conviction, and I turned away from the intensity of his gaze.

To the west, only a sliver of fiery red remained on the horizon. We sat in the healing si-

lence and watched as the earth turned away from the sun and into darkness.

His granddaughter's lilting voice, raised in song, came floating up to us through the deepening night from the hut below. At first I thought she was chanting in her native tongue or one of the old dialects, but then I recognized the tune.

It was just a country and western song about lonely hearts and wayward lovers.

And about somebody having done somebody wrong.

## SOLUTION TO THE SEPTEMBER "UNSOLVED":

Karl Turner from Gertland, code name A and posing as a contractor, shot and killed the insidious rebel El-Meenie.

| DAY       | CODE | NAME          | COUNTRY  | COVER      |
|-----------|------|---------------|----------|------------|
| Monday    | D    | Larry Smith   | Idastan  | doctor     |
| Tuesday   | B    | Oliver Rusk   | Frankia  | banker     |
| Wednesday | E    | Noel Parker   | Helgary  | engineer   |
| Thursday  | A    | Karl Turner   | Gertland | contractor |
| Friday    | C    | Manfred Queen | Justina  | artist     |

MYSTERY CLASSIC

# The Poacher

Sidney Gowing



...LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG

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“**T**ight places,” said Commander Venables reflectively, “are of two kinds, pleasant and unpleasant. It’s simply joss whether you get out or not. To be blackmailed for murder, particularly if one knows that one is guilty, belongs to the unpleasant class. And that’s what happened to me in—”

“Stop!” said Edward Strachan, and held up three fingers to the silent steward who was crossing the room.

The three commanders sat in the warmest corner of the smoking room at the Naval Barracks, Portsmouth. A soft rain beat upon the windows. Not for half an hour would they need to tramp through the wet dockyard to the Asia pontoon.

Commander Robert Venables, popularly “Bolo,” was long and slim, with a clear mahogany complexion, whimsical eyes, and a masterful beak of a nose. Burdon-Lee was precisely his opposite type, light-colored and dreamy, with a crop of freckles that powdered his face and overflowed into his hair. Strachan was small and agile, his expression alert and wary. All three were of the same term on *Britannia*, and had seen many windy terms since the old ship passed.

The steward placed three glasses on the table. Strachan lifted one of them and blinked at Commander Venables.

“A small tribute to the most ingenious liar in the service,” he murmured. “Go on, Bolo; we are listening.”

Burdon-Lee shook his head at Strachan and smiled cryptically. Venables’ brows knitted in protest.

“One may occasionally pull a leg, Ned,” he said quietly, “but what I am about to tell you is the truth in all its amplitude.”

Ned set down his empty glass and sighed.

“The secant of the latitude plus the sine of the declination equals the sine of the true amplitude,” he said. “Proceed.”

“In 19—,” said Bolo, “while a sweet little lieutenant, I got my first command. After looking in at Gieve’s to buy a larger size in caps, I hoisted my pennant and so forth on the fishery protection ship *Jaguar*. She’d just finished refitting at Chatham. My orders were to proceed north and relieve her sister ship *Ocelot*, on duty at Aberdeen.

“I might have known that was a bad omen to start with. The devil invented Chatham and its climate and surroundings, and one of his chief outlying dependencies is Aberdeen. But I didn’t

worry. As a two-ringer with a first command I was feeling about three sizes larger than Drake.

"I took the *Jaguar*—by the way, I'm dazzle-painting all the names in this show so as not to hurt people's feelings—into Tynemouth on my way, and there I met the *Ocelot*. She had orders to come south without waiting for me to relieve her. So, of course, her commanding officer came on board to hand over the glad news.

"And that," said Bolo, "is where I first tumbled that there was something dark and sinister lurking in those misty seas. The skipper of *Ocelot* was sort of pallid and jumpy and depressed—like a man who's just been a prisoner or a medium or a co-respondent or something. *You* know, Ned."

"Who was he?" asked Strachan.

"Jones. Lieutenant Jones."

"Good name," murmured Strachan.

"He left the service ages ago, having come into horrid opulence, and now he breeds Black Berkshires and takes medals for 'em. So there's no harm in mentioning him; he's a ship that's passed in the night. Well, old Jones sat in my wardroom looking like the ghost of himself and throwing out dark warnings that I couldn't make head or tail of.

"'Look here, old thing,' I said, 'I wish you'd say right out what you mean. What are you hinting at?'

"'Oh, nothing!' said Jones.

"'You aren't stuffy because they've sent me up north to do you out of this stunt?' said I. It was Jones's first command. 'Goodness knows I never wanted the job!'

"'Good lord, no!' said Jones. 'I was never so glad to be shifted in my life. Don't make any mistake about that.' He lit up one of my cigars, and his fist was pretty shaky. 'I had a bit of a shock up there, and perhaps I haven't-quite got over it.'

"I waited for him to open out. Jones was an old pal of mine, and one of the best. But there was nothing doing.

"'All I can tell you,' he said, 'is to keep your weather eye lifting if you come across any of those Scandinavian fishermen, specially the Danes and Swedes.'

"'Naturally. That was what I'm sent for.'

"'They're an obstinate crowd,' said Jones. 'You steer clear of them, that's what I mean.'

"'How on earth d'you suppose I'm going to do that?' said I. 'If I

catch 'em poaching inside our three mile limit, I've got to run 'em in. That's what all the row's about.'

"I know," said Jones. 'But if you have any trouble, or they refuse to heave to, don't fire over them—unless you're very sure of your gunner.'

"I never heard such bosh as you're talking!" said I. 'Why don't you tell me what you're driving at, if it's anything?'

"It isn't—much," said Jones, getting red. 'I was a fool to have mentioned it at all. If you happen to come across a steam trawler called the *Sverige*—but never mind that. We've been pals long enough for me to give you a hint, and for the same reason, if you should chance to hear of any trouble connected with me while you're up there, I know you're not the chap to spread it about. I've had a bit of a shakeup as I said, and I think I may cut the service.'

"Skittles!" said I.

"I'm going home on three weeks' leave, and I shall think it over. Goodnight, old son, and the best of luck to you," said old Jones, and he pushed off forlornly. There was no getting anything more out of him.

"I sailed on the next tide, wondering what had happened to Jones. It wasn't like him. He used to have a nerve like cold brass and was generally a merry sort of pup. However, one takes things as they come, and I didn't worry.

"I reported in the Forth, and eventually reached my beat, which was Invergordon to Cromarty. It took us a while to get there. The *Jaguar* was a holy terror. She was a converted trawler. They'd only kept her on because she was cheap to run; cheapness was the slogan just then. Her speed was about the same as a horse tramcar—she could barely do ten knots, and eight was nearer her average.

"In fact, she was the sort of craft that does get detailed to protect fisheries in peacetime—apparently for the reason that a fairly fast iron-built trawler with a bad conscience is quite likely to outsteam her. However, a first command's a first command, and I wouldn't have swapped with the Number One of the flagship. We patrolled for six days in thick weather, and there was absolutely nothing doing. It was a bit lonely, of course."

"Who was your sub?" asked Strachan.

"Didn't have a sub. Second-in-command was a gunner—a glorious old bottle-nosed gunner with a wary eye and a black torpedo beard. One of the very best; his name was John Pym—same as the irreverent blighter who started Charles the Martyr on his road to

the scaffold. Probably a descendant. You remember Green's history: 'Pym himself rose only to sit down choked with tears'? But *my* John never wept. The only tears shed on that cruise were my own.

"On the evenin' of the seventh day I was up on the bridge talkin' over the evolution with Mr. Pym. I told him the Danish trawlers were causing a lot of trouble fishing in British waters, but it seemed as if our joss was out, as far as catching 'em went.

"Yes, sir," says Pym, "and the Aberdeen fishermen are pretty sick about it. There's some rich grounds here, and the Board of Fisheries has called a close time on them."

"The trouble is," I said, "that while the Scotch fishermen respect the closed waters, the foreigners don't. They run in and rake the protected grounds, and sweep off with big hauls—mainly at night. They find it worthwhile even with the risk of losing their gear and having a fifty pound fine to pay."

"Our fishers catch it a lot hotter when the Danish gunboats nab 'em up Iceland way," said Pym, who was feeling a bit vindictive about it. And ten minutes later as we rounded Scaith Head, keepin' pretty close in, the signalman calls: "Trawler inshore, with her gear down, sir!"

"Pym and I picked her up at the same moment, and we got the glasses on her.

"She's a Dutchman, sir!" said Pym; he belonged to the early vintage and called all Swedes, Danes, and Huns Dutchmen. The trawler was a big red iron Dane. Poacher? By gad, she was scooping up the bottom right through the thick of the reservation!

"The Dane was nearly two miles away, and we closed him. I hoisted the international signal 'Stop instantly.'

"He took no more notice of my signal than if it had been the steward's shirt. He didn't even slip his trawl but waited to yank it aboard—that was what galled me—and when he'd done it, we'd gained a mile on him. Then he steered straight out to sea.

"He had the legs of us. He made a good twelve knots, and there was the old *Jaguar* thumpin' and gruntin' after him, doin' about eleven—and that was a miracle. But my chief E.R.A. actually whacked her up till we were holding the Dane and even gainin' a little. What it was like in the engine room I don't know. Hell must have been a holiday to it.

"It'll be dark in half an hour," growled old Pym in his beard, "and then we'll lose him."

"I could see that for myself. And I gave the order 'Starboard gun's

crew, close up!' And I knew old Pym wondered why I hadn't done it before. But something at the back of my head told me not to; perhaps it was the whisper of Jones.

"'Common shell!' I said; 'give her one across the bows, but well outside of her.'

"There was an old four inch drainpipe forward, but we didn't use that. We carried a three pounder on each bow, and the shell kicked up a pretty little spurt about fifty yards ahead of the Dane.

"He held on, with the sparks flying out of his smokestack. He must have known we had him set, though he took no more notice than if we were blowing him kisses. And then I fairly lost my wool. I wasn't the philosopher in those days that I am now. One couldn't have the beggar defying one like that.

"'Give him another,' I said. 'Closer aboard!'

"Wang! went the three pounder again. The trawler stopped her engines and swung head to sea, and I saw the crew running about on her like ants when you stir 'em up with a stick.

"'Stopped her that time, sir!' said Pym, grinning. 'She shut down as quick as if she'd been hit.'

"'Lucky for her she wasn't,' said I. And we ran down alongside her. As we came round her stern, I saw the name under her counter—*Sverige-Esbjerg*.

"I didn't give more than a glance to that. I was looking at something different.

"Just outside the Dane's wheelhouse lay a thing that looked like a lump of clothes—till I saw it was a man in a jersey and sea boots, all broken and doubled up, and the deck round it was dark with blood.

"The shell was a blind shell, but it had caught one of them. Pym hailed the trawler—my voice had dried up a bit. Her crew was lowering a boat, and the skipper called out in English:

"'Ja, I vos comin' to you!' he said. 'You haf done your work vell, captain. You haf kill my mate!'

"This was a long time ago, you know. Since then one has seen plenty of dead men, and a good many of one's own pals, too. One gets used to that.

"But this was peacetime. And this was my first dead man.

"And when I saw that poor devil of a fisherman lying there all smashed up, I felt physically and mentally sick. It wasn't only that the Admiralty would probably break me for it—you never know how they'll take an affair like that. It was the thing itself. I saw two of the crew lift up the body and carry it slowly down the hatchway.



"The skipper was alongside in his boat. I told him to come aboard. He was a big ruffian, about fifty, with a tangle of red hair and whiskers. I took him to the chartroom.

"'Vell,' he said, 'you vill haf to answer for dis, captain.'

"'Nobody can regret it more than I do,' said I. 'I would give anything if it could be undone, captain. The shell was not meant to do any harm, and I'm at a loss to know how it struck your ship. Why did you run for it? You have brought it on yourself.'

"'Ve vas nod doing any harm!' said the skipper. 'My ship vos oudside der Scotch waters as all mine crew can swear.'

"I told him it was no use taking that line. He was a mile inside the limit when we saw him, in a prohibited area to boot. For that matter we were in British waters still.

"'Vell den,' says the skipper very grimly, 've vas your brisoners, and you vill haf to answer to my government and to yours for der dead man dot is on my ship.'

"I didn't need telling that. I was envying the dead man. But I didn't answer him for a moment or two, and the Dane came up closer.

"'See here, captain,' he said, 'maybe dere vas no need for you to be cut oud from der navy, nor for me and my ship to be brought in as brisoners! Suppose we settle it up between us, eh?'

"I asked him what on earth he meant.

"'Look see; der dead man haf a widow and children. Dey get nodings from your government; dey vill say he was a poacher. But you gif me one hondred pound English for der widow, and leave it at dot. I got ay avvid my ship, der dead man he is buried at sea, and all go vell. You can trust your men nod to talk?'

"I fancy neither of you fellows has been up against anything like that. When I got over the first shock of the offer, it was like a life buoy to a drowning man. It looked so reasonable on the face of it. There was the poor chap's widow to think of. It seemed to be all one could do. On the other side was the inquiry, and the publicity and all the other beastliness, if I ran the ship in. With the moral certainty of having to leave the service—even if I wasn't chucked out. And the first cause of it all was a few baskets of fish in the trawler's hold. But I think it was the widow I had in mind. What would you have done?"

Strachan shifted in his seat.

"Don't care to pose as a moralist," he said. "I believe—I would have paid up."

Burdon-Lee nodded.

"I told the skipper I hadn't so much money on board," continued Venables.

"You haf your checkbook, aind it?" said he. 'Gif me a draft on your bank—dot vas goot enough for me.'

"My checkbook was in the cabin, and I brought it up and started to fill in the check to Self—and then, somehow, I stopped and chucked down the pen.

"No," I said. 'Won't do. I'll take you and the body to Aberdeen.'

"I took a dekko at him. He was looking queer.

"You haf more sense, captain," said he. 'You will be disgrace and thrown out of the service—more better we settle it up. Tink of der vidow!'

"I am," said I. 'I'm thinking it's little of the money she'll touch if it goes through your hands. This goes up to headquarters.'

"The fellow offered to take fifty pounds. He began to storm. He said he'd hold his tongue for nothing if he were allowed to go. I cut all that out and called to Pym.

"Mr. Pym," said I, 'detail a prize crew and take charge of the trawler. Take station astern, and follow me to Aberdeen. The skipper will remain here with me.'

"Ay ay, sir!" said Pym.

"The skipper seemed inclined to break loose and go berserk, but my gunner's mate tactfully shepherded him down below. Just before Pym pushed off, he allowed himself a word with me. 'Beg pardon, sir,' he said sympathetically, 'but don't let this worry you, if you'll excuse an old hand sayin' so. It was an accident an' you weren't to blame, nor the gun's crew either—we can all swear to that. You'd have been in the right if you'd sunk him after he refused to heave to. It might come all right yet.'

"It was pretty cold comfort for me. While the trawler was following us astern, with Pym in charge, I thought it over. You know what the Admiralty are. It was a level certainty they'd make me the goat. And that wasn't the worst of it.

"Nerves aren't a failing of mine. But I got 'em then. It was just gettin' dusk, and the trawler, snooping along behind us like a ghost, was worse than having the *Flying Dutchman* in tow. There was nothing missing. The crew had hoisted the Danish colors at half-mast as a sign of mourning, and there was a big black cloth over the hatch of the cabin where the dead fisherman lay. I was glad the skipper hadn't asked me aboard to view the body. I felt I couldn't have stood that.

"To keep my mind off the question of resignation versus cashiering I tried to think out what sort of a letter I'd write to the widow—

"It was about ten minutes later—though it seemed like an age—that I sensed trouble astern of us. There was quite a little riot on board the trawler, and my prize crew was mopping it up. It didn't take 'em long. I dropped back abreast 'em.

"What are you about?" I yelled through the megaphone. 'Can't you keep order, man!'

"Then I saw Pym coming up the hatchway with a large bundle in his arms.

"Beg pardon, sir! Got a message of importance to communicate," he said. 'Will you slow her and take me aboard?'

"Wondering what on earth he was about, I had both ships stopped; the Dane's crew were jabberin' and protestin', but my quartermaster brought 'em to attention. Pym came off in the trawler's boat.

"Can I see you in the chart room a moment, sir,' he said, and in we went, Pym carrying his burden. It was wrapped in a sail cover, and strippin' this off, he flung into my chair a limp, inert body in a jersey and fisherman's boots. I pretty nearly jumped out of mine, for I'd got all I could stand.

"How dare you!" I said—and then I short-circuited, for Pym was wearing a sardonic grin like the figurehead of the old Medusa. I took another look at the body.

"Its limbs were round an' thick, shapeless as sausages, its sea boots were tied on with string, an' there was sticky red stuff on the jersey.

"What's this?" said I.

"That's the Dutchman you murdered, sir,' said Pym, grinning in a disciplined way.

"Good lord! D'you mean to say it's a dummy-run?"

"Precisely, sir. A dummy-run it is an' nothin' else."

"I dropped into the other chair, opposite the corpse. When I had wiped away the tears, Pym reported. He didn't laugh—a grin was his limit.

"As soon as we'd taken station, sir, I took a look round, as you might say, havin' my suspicions. They'd mopped up the deck when I got aboard, but I know what red paint is, havin' seen it before.

"Havin' worked out the observation, I thought I'd take a look at that corpse laid reverently below. The Dutchmen wanted to get in

the way, but we soon put that right. I went down an' found this gory old effigy in a bunk, with some of the red paint still on him. They were just goin' to take him to pieces, but havin' more respect for the dead, I brought him away as he is.'

"I laughed till the scuttles rattled, while the body wagged in its chair—you'd have sworn it was laughing, too. Then I shook hands with Pym.

"'Pym,' I said, 'you've more of the red distilled essence of strategy than the Admiralty war staff. I didn't dream of a bluff. It looked so beastly natural.'

"'Jus' so, sir. From a bit of a distance it took us all in, an' I reckon they've played this game before; they've got the thing brought down too fine for new hands. They saw we were bound to catch 'em, so they put up this dummy-an'-red-paint evolution. Likely they thought they'd scare us into lettin' 'em go.'

"'That ruffian offered to take a hundred and say nothing about it,' I said.

"Pym coughed.

"'The Admiralty's so squeamish nowadays, sir,' said he, 'otherwise the yardarm'd be the best cure for that skipper.'

"'I'm fed up with dead men,' said I. 'Carry on, Mr. Pym. We will proceed to Aberdeen. I shall see you get full credit.'

"Pym saluted, and went back to the prize.

"The Danish skipper, watching through the scuttle of the artificers' mess room below, had seen the body come aboard and was wise. He requested an audience of me, and he was an agitated skipper.

"'It was nodings but a choke, captain!' he said, gnawing his lips, 'a choke—'

"'Yes,' said I, for I wasn't feeling vindictive any longer; 'and you'll find it a pretty expensive brand of joke. You'll be lucky if that hundred pounds you got last month covers your fine for fish poaching. The less you talk, the better for you.'

"I spent the next two hours blessing Pym. I wasn't the first loot-in-command who'd been hauled out of the gumbo by a warrant officer—though one wouldn't say so in mixed company. The sea had given up its dead; I was entitled to laugh, and I did. But mine is a sympathetic soul, and I found time for a tear of pity, too.

"Now I knew what happened to Jones!

"This was the same trawler that the *Ocelot* had nabbed. Poor old Jones had given me the name—the *Sverige*. I remembered that

now. It was as clear as a searchlight. The Dane had played off this stunt on Jones and got away with it.

"Knaves grow bold by success. The *Sverige* wasn't expecting another protection ship along so soon, and when I dropped on her out of the mist, she tried the same game on me. It nearly came off.

"Jones of the *Ocelot* had parted a hundred and was wondering whether murder would out. No wonder Jones was down in the mouth! But then he was minus a Pym; that's where I had the pull. I was sorry for Jones.

"Eighteen hours later, *Jaguar* and her prize made Aberdeen; the S.O. in charge—old copper-nosed Bickerstaffe, a great discipline and spit-and-polish man—came on board my flagship. His eyes bulged out like a land crab's as he stood lookin' at a headless and crimson-stained dummy corpse, which we'd lashed to the forestay by way of a figurehead.

"Eh! he gurgled. 'What the doose? How—eh—what—'

"That's a peaceful fisherman, sir, caught guttin' haddocks in Scottish waters and shot as an example to others,' said I; 'if you'll come below, sir, I'll explain.'

"We had out the wardroom port, and I explained. Bickerstaffe laughed till the old *Jaguar* started sheddin' rivets. And presently Aberdeen—which is a town unjustly accused of seeing jokes with difficulty—was laughing, too."

Strachan drew a deep breath. "The most superb liar that ever passed out of Greenwich," he murmured.

Commander Burdon-Lee rose.

"Ned," he said reprovingly. "I cannot sit here and hear our Bolo accused. To my knowledge there is but one misstatement in this little report of his."

"One?"

"Yes, one. It is not true that Jones left the service.

"I am 'Jones'—sometime of the *Ocelot*."

"Bolo relieved my mind of the guilt of blood—not that I worried about that, I'm not as tender in the heart as Bolo—and the fear of getting hauled over the coals, by sending me a packing case per passenger train, carriage paid. It contained the limp dummy of a fisherman, and it had cost me a cold hundred.

"With it was a triplicate indent note: 'Corpse, Danish, one in number,' signed 'Bolo.' It was very thoughtful of Bolo."

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# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



**S**tewart Hoagy, an amateur sleuth who has starred in seven previous novels, takes center stage again in David Handler's **The Man Who Loved Women to Death** (Doubleday, \$23.95). As a young man Hoagy was on top of the world: the author of a celebrated first novel and the husband of a beautiful actress. These days he's a man who has pulled himself back up from the bottom of a bottle, a scorned second novel, and a divorce. Now he enjoys the company of his faithful hound, the wardrobe of a dandy, a respectable career as a highly paid ghostwriter for celebrities, and a Manhattan apartment he shares with his ex-wife and their new baby. But Hoagy gets the queasy feeling that his distant past has caught up with him when he receives chapters of a memoir penned by an anonymous writer who is killing the women he describes in the manuscript. He can't help but suspect an old friend, a former football hero and golden boy of their Ivy League college days; but he can't quite believe it of the man, either. So Hoagy begins playing a very dangerous game alone. Fans looking for the charm, savoir faire, and wit that mark this series will get a peek into a darker human psyche as well.

Fine art, quirky characters, and scenes set in both Rome and an English country village add to the joys of Iain Pears's **Giotto's Hand** (Scribner, \$21). The head of Rome's Art Theft Squad has an ambitious bureaucrat angling for the general's job. That makes the general's right hand, Flavia, less patient than usual with her British boyfriend, Jonathan Argyll, who's been offered a teaching job but who would then have to abandon his fledgling business as art dealer. So Jonathan, off to England to consult his old mentor, is happy to oblige her with a favor: ask around about an Englishman

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recently implicated in an old theft that the general long ago relegated to his "Giotto" file, a file of unsolved cases the general thinks are the work of one brilliant, unidentified man. A neat twist at the end is the cherry on this fudge sundae of a mystery.

Elizabeth George's latest, **Deception on His Mind** (Bantam, \$24.95), is given over entirely to Sergeant Barbara Havers. Lynley and his new bride are off on their honeymoon, while St. James and his wife assumedly are in residence in London. Havers, on the other hand, is supposed to be on holiday. Instead, surreptitiously she has followed her quiet and friendly Pakistani neighbor and his charming and affectionate young daughter to an economically distressed seaside town where—according to the telly news—there threatens an outbreak of racial tension. To Havers' delight the local investigation is being headed by a woman whom Barbara knows, and who is willing to add Barbara unofficially to her team. George's detailed character studies and her exploration of contemporary Britain and its class and race issues make George recommended reading for P.D. James' fans, those mystery readers who look for moral dilemmas and psychological issues as well as a murder mystery for their entertainment.

Dianne Day brings back her early twentieth century heroine Fremont Jones in her third book in the series, **The Bohemian Murders** (Doubleday, \$21.95). Burned out of her San Francisco home after the 1906 earthquake, Fremont replaces a lighthouse keeper up the coast, near the artists' enclave called Carmel-by-the-Sea. She reopens her typewriting business and settles in, but trouble follows when she discovers the body of a young woman washed up on the beach. A plucky heroine, a darkly handsome suitor in the wings, and a glimpse back into history all add to the charms this series has to offer.

Now that Judy Mercer's *Fast Forward* is out in paperback, Ariel Gold is back in Mercer's second book, **Double Take** (Pocket Books, \$22). Ariel now knows who she is, although she's not recovered fully from the amnesia that marked her introduction in *Fast Forward*. Thus her reasons for visiting an island off the coast of South Carolina are twofold: to take some time away from the bustle of L.A. and her frantic job as a TV news researcher; and to spend some time with her new-found grandfather. On her first night on the beach, however, an eerie encounter with a local man becomes even more so when he turns up dead the following day. Now Ariel's nose for news is twitching in the place she has just begun to think of as home.

Fans of William Marshall's Yellowthread Street mysteries will welcome a return to the Hong Kong station amid the old gang in **Nightmare Syndrome** (Mysterious Press, \$22). In the island's final days under British rule, tensions are already running high without the several added attractions that make up Marshall's tale. Detective Chief Inspector Harry Feiffer trails a killer who leaves his victims dead of fright, their eyes clawed out by their own hands. Detective Senior Inspector Christopher O'Yee wrestles with a plethora of bureaucratic memoranda and the alarming appearance of six armed thugs who have taken up residence in his office. Meanwhile, Auden and Spencer head for the basement, where an old World War II bomb has apparently nestled (undetected) for lo these many years—until, that is, Spencer decides to disarm it himself. Look to Marshall for a heady mix of mania, horror, hilarity, and imagination that separates Yellowthread Street from the 87th Precinct by much more than miles. Marshall has carved out his own niche, a rabbit hole disguised as a police station, and readers like me find it well nigh irresistible.

Lia Matera's hapless attorney, Willa Jansson, finds herself in the star-crossed role of defense attorney in the case from hell in **Star Witness** (Simon & Schuster, \$22) when a Santa Cruz psychiatrist who has done her a favor calls in his marker for a new client. Willa's due for a vacation from her corporate job in San Francisco anyway, and she earnestly hopes that the folks back home (among them her boss and her protest-happy hippie mother) will never learn that she plans to enter the Santa Cruz courtroom and defend mild-mannered mycologist Alan Miller from the charges of vehicular manslaughter by presenting a case of alien abduction. Anonymity, however, is not in the stars for the fast-talking, stouthearted Willa—not with a supporting cast of eccentric believers, a maddened widow shooting off guns, a young witness terrified of her grandparents, and—oh yes—Willa's mother. Add to this brew a bizarre crop circle in the area and you have the makings of a media frenzy. There's lots of info on the phenomenon here, which makes this a timely topic for *X-Files* fans. It's a heady concoction sure to tickle the senses of most mystery fans.

**Erratum:** In our June issue we inadvertently neglected to give the name of the author in our review of *The Dead Past* (Write Way, \$21.95). He is Tom Piccirilli.

# THE STORY THAT WON



The April Mysterious Photo-Robert H. Wynn of Young's Honorable mentions go to ingston, New Jersey; R. J. Canada; Marnie L. Schulen-J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Massachusetts; Daniel Le-ginia; Shana Carter of Ithaca, New York; Diane Coutr   of Santa Monica, California; John Satta of New York, New York; Brenda K. Ward of St. Charles, Missouri; Jan Streilein of Lansdale, Pennsylvania; James Spyker of Toronto, Ontario, Canada; Ray Fraser of Canton, Michigan; and James S. Pirkey of Allandale, Florida.

graph contest was won by Point, Ontario, Canada. Bernice F. Weiss of Liv-Stevens of Calgary, Alberta, burg of Madison, Wisconsin; David A. Rooney of Natick, Boeuf of Springfield, Vir-

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

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## UNDERCOVER by Robert H. Wynn

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"I do not like this at all, Boris! Natasha said she would be waiting under a striped umbrella with the microfilm she is to pass to us. Look down there! *All* of the umbrellas are striped except one. How shall we find her?"

"I do not know, Igor. I have never seen her. We have only the note from her left in the flowerpot in the hotel lobby as usual. She is a new operative with our organization. I was warned that she may not get instructions clear in her head. She might have meant the *unstriped* umbrella, which would make more sense. Let us follow the plan and go down there to sit across from that woman under the plain umbrella. We shall know if she responds correctly to the password."

"Good morning, madam! Do you think it might rain?" said Boris guardedly.

The woman looked out from under her widebrimmed hat and replied, "Not where you two are going!"

Boris and Igor realized their mistake and started to get up, but two burly agents from the next table firmly held them down.

"We have your friend Natasha *and* the film, so now you both will be enjoying nice *narrow* stripes for a long, long time!"

"I told you, Boris. This film business is not what it used to be! There is just no future in it!"

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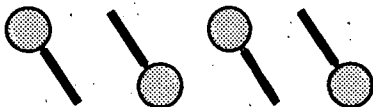
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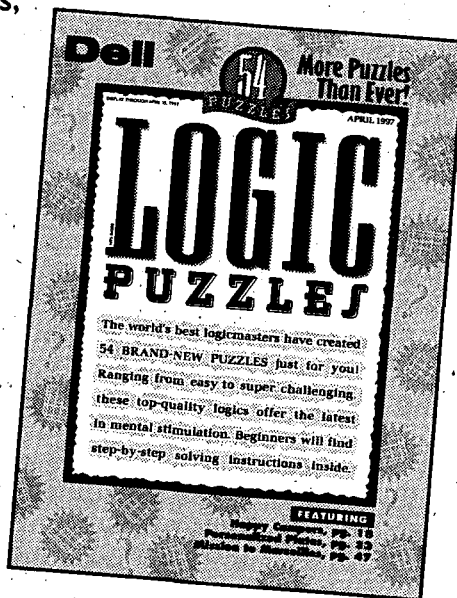
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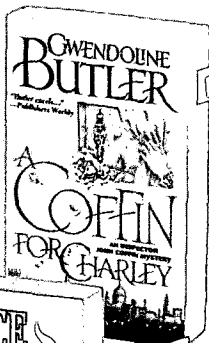
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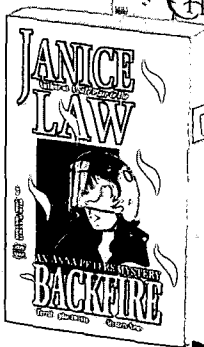
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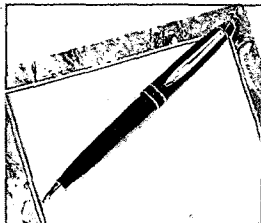
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